

INFERNO!



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Tales of Fantasy & Adventure

INFERNO!

I'VE BEEN thinking a bit recently, about "heroes". Here at the Black Library, our job is all about creating heroes – well, okay, heroes and their fiendish counterparts, all those wickedly cool villains. However you define them, though, it is these individual characters, whether good or evil, who are the focus of pretty much all of our attention.

Think about it. We're producing top quality, all-action adventures set in the dark and gothic worlds of Warhammer and Warhammer 40,000. But how could you write, for example, "a 40K novel"? How could you squeeze the entirety of that vast, rich background into one book? It would have to be tens of thousands of pages long – or possibly worse be a hotch-potch of ill-assembled parts, with each aspect of the game world crammed in, almost so the reader could tick them off, one by one, as they popped up.

The way we portray our fabulously detailed worlds is actually by adding to them: we create a new

hero, or occasionally take an existing one, and set them in new situations. Through their eyes, we can portray new or familiar aspects of the richly detailed Warhammer world. This means that, rather than reading a mere travelogue or battle report, we're pretty much right there with them, enjoying their adventures.

Now, putting a new hero into the existing Warhammer or 40K universe is fraught with traps. These worlds are already detailed in a great series of game rulebooks, chiefly the army books and codices. If our hero is to do something amazing, we must ensure that it is not something that involves a part of the world which has already been detailed – because otherwise, it would have already been mentioned in the appropriate codex! If it has not, it therefore did not take place... and that's why we reject some of the stories we get sent!

Dealing with already existing heroes and villains from the game is just as troublesome. Certain

characters, typically folk of the stature of a Sigmar, Orion, Abaddon or Mephiston, can sometimes make an appearance in a "supporting role", as they call it in Hollywood. Our new hero may need to consult with them (as in the start of the Bloodquest comic strip, for example, where Leonatos is exiled by his Blood Angel masters, Dante and Mephiston). But again, Leonatos cannot kill Dante, or blow up Baal, or even return from his Bloodquest as the "most famous hero the Blood Angels ever had" – because we already know that that isn't the case.

This might all sound tricky – but with a certain amount of skill, Inferno and Warhammer Monthly's writers have managed to create dozens of memorable new heroes (and villains). So successfully, in fact, that there's even talk of a Bloodquest movie! Now that's a result!

Marc Gascoigne
Editor

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GREEN ROCK, amber sky, white heat. All revealed in a lurid glare that slanted in through the widening aperture of the whining hydraulic landing ramp.

The tip of the armoured ramp crunched into the mica glass dust of the landing circle. The oily piston-struts hissed to a halt. Steam dissipated, and there it was. Eidon. A precious, ancient world, and one possessed of a savage, natural beauty too.

So thought Librarian Petrok of the Iron Snakes Chapter as he stepped down out of his landing shuttle and surveyed the open majesty of the land. He was framed for war, bareheaded and clean-shaven, his black locks bound up behind his deep skull, a towering form tall and broad even for a space marine. The edges of his gunmetal-grey Imperator armour were lined with white and red.

But he did not lack a soul. Eidon was starkly beautiful. The rock in the landscape around the blasted landing circle were vivid green, semi-crystal, glittering in the warm, clear air. Along the skyline, jagged vents spat white fire into the air. The phosphor fires, burning up from deep seams and faults in the earth beneath, powered the foundries and smithies of venerable Eidon City.

White heat, the flames which kept the smelters and manufactories of Eidon turning in the Emperor's name.

Petrok remarked upon the majesty of the place to his lexicanium, Rodos, as they walked together down the cinder path from the landing circle, under shattered alabaster arches, towards the main Imperial staging post, their bearers in line behind them. Rodos looked at him as if uncertain as to whether Petrok was joking or not.

Petrok decided to drop it. If the man couldn't see it, then there was no point explaining. Some Iron Snake hearts, he knew, were too ironclad to see anything but war. Petrok wondered if the fact that he could see the beauty was his weakness or his greatest strength.

Doom had come to Eidon the year before, when the dark eldar had taken it in a single night. The action had marked the start of what the chapter records on Ithaka referred to as the Third Eldar War, when the foe launched out of their shadowy hiding places and struck into the Reef Worlds: Cormax and Eidon. Due to the strategic position of their homeworld, it was the Iron Snakes' blood-privilege as a chapter of the Adeptus Astartes to have borne the brunt of dark eldar incursions into this part of the Imperium for sixty years.



IMPERIAL GUARDSMEN – a massed force of 300,000, mainly Leoparda stormtroops and Donorian light armour – had been deployed to Eidon in the first months to effect a liberation. They had failed, ground to a standstill.

Freeing nine squads of Iron Snakes from the ongoing reprisal against the dark eldar advances through the Reef Worlds, mighty Seydon, primarch of the chapter, had sent his Snakes to succeed on Eidon where the Guard had foundered. The force was lead by the old hero-captain Phobor, and by Librarian Petrok.

Petrok's landing had been delayed by an orbital bombardment. By the time he and the young, tonsured lexicanium marched into the Imperial staging post, Phobor was already leading an assault on the southern walls of Eidon City.

Petrok could hear the crack and volley of the distant fighting rolling across the gritty, green slopes, and he could see the smoke pall rising, three kilometres away. The white phosphor vents on the skyline continued to rasp and blur the amber sky with their primordial heat.

WHITE HEAT

By DAN ABNETT

The staging post was all but empty. Half a dozen sculptural white awnings, discoloured slightly by months of exposure to the heat-sear, swayed in the breeze. There were rows of smaller habitat tents made of a darker, coarser canvas, and stacks of munitions under netting in sandbagged dugouts. Several armoured vehicles were parked nearby. They had been wash-painted with a lime overcoat to mask them in the green landscape. Behind the main command tents, on the lee of the hill, rows of infirmary tents stood all the way down to the roadway in the valley. Petrok could smell the rot and disinfectant drifting up from them.

Guardsmen in the livery of the *Leoparda* saluted as the great librarian approached, his equally formidable lexicanium a step behind, carrying the casket containing the librarian's holy tarot deck on a padded, satin rest. Behind them came the bearer of Petrok's ornate helmet and the bearer of the power sword *Bellus*. Behind that strode two more bearers swinging censurs and holding fluttering pennants of the Iron Snakes aloft. And behind them walked four more, carrying the sacred Book of Lives in its litter-like hardwood chest. All the bearers were robed, hunched hulking figures.

One of the Guardsmen pointed at the main tent. Petrok saw how he was trembling, his face pallid and dank despite the midday heat. Without speaking, Petrok advanced towards the tent. His bearers snuffled and growled sidelong out of their cowls at the Guardsman, making him dart back.

'Enough of that!' Rodos barked at them.

Inside the tent was a vast, round table, the surface of which was a glass plate illuminated from beneath by moving lights that showed the contours and arrangement of the city and the disposition of the troops. Guard officers stood around it, and they all looked up and stepped back solemnly as the Iron Snake and his retinue entered.

'I am Petrok of the Iron Snakes,' he said, as if any here could not know who he was.

One, a *Leoparda* general by his sleeve bars, stepped forward. 'Major General Corson. Welcome, great librarian. Your worthy commander has already begun his assault. He requests that you make your strategic assessment as soon as possible, so that—'

Petrok held up one huge, armoured hand. 'I am well aware of what my commander expects of me. Show me the dispositions.'

Struck dumb, Corson led Petrok to the table. The librarian looked down at it, his sharp eyes taking in every detail, every flickering unit light-point, every drifting rune. Those eyes fed the data back into his brain, his greatest weapon, where they could be composed, considered, analysed, dissected.

He smiled.

'Master?' Rodos asked, noticing the expression.

'Three-point fluid dispersal along two insertions. Typical of dear Captain Phobor. Just as he did on Tull.'

Rodos gazed at the tabletop for a moment, trying to discern the pattern. 'I see,' he said.

He did not, and Petrok knew it. Rodos had a long way to come before he would master the techniques of memory and comparison that allowed a great tactical mind to take in all battle assessments at a glance.

But the real reason Petrok had allowed himself to smile was not his immediate recognition of Phobor's favourite tactic. It was a simpler thing. The table reminded Petrok of the Strategium board where he had learned his craft long ago from his old, beloved master, Nector. It was a whimsy, but it pleased him to enjoy it. He had, as he liked to remind himself, a soul.

'These here?' he asked, tapping the tableplate with his fingertips.

'Three battalions of *Leoparda*, in reserve.' The major general's voice was hollow and scared.

'Why?'

'Y-your brave captain wanted them... out of the way. He was quite insistent. He didn't want them to... to...'

'Confuse his aim,' said a Donorian officer smugly from behind, clearly enjoying the *Leoparda*'s discomfort. Petrok smiled again. He could just imagine how Phobor had roared in here, accusing the Imperial Guard officers of weakness, cowardice, incompetence, and every other sin under the suns. They had failed to discharge the holy liberation, and Phobor would make them sweat now and repent in punishment details later. No wonder the camp was terrified.

There was some muttering in the officer ranks, and Petrok frowned, still looked at the table.

'Silence!' Rodos growled, noticing his librarian's furrows. Silence fell again.

Even the bearers had stopped their growling.

Petrok put his hands on the tabletop and leaned down, looking deeper, no longer making a tactical, forebrain assessment. He was reaching out with the darker, more profound parts of his mind. He was using his gifts to see beyond the now, into the when and the if, to sense the fortunes of the battle.

A chill fell on the tent enclosure. Frost formed on the tabletop glass around Petrok's hands. One of the junior Guard officers fainted and was hustled away out of sight. The bearers began to murmur and bark, until Rodos quieted them with a savage look.

Petrok ignored them all. He was locked with the patterns of past, present, and future now. He was seeing behind reality, watching the way the structures moved and meshed.

It was... perfect. Phobor's ploy had been entirely appropriate. The vanguards and support lines were placed correctly. Eidon City would fall within four hours, with minimal losses on their part. His report would convey little to Phobor except to bolster his confidence.

Except... something. Something small and awry. Something persistent and nagging. Like a tiny pebble lodged inside the cuff of a terminator glove, niggling away.

What? What?

'Master?' Rodos asked.

Petrok stood back.

'This,' he said, pointing to one light on the eastern side of the illuminated chart.

Rodos consulted the key. 'Damocles Squad, master. Captain Phobor sent them round to ensure the foe would not break from the city when it fell.'

'A sound move, but it troubles me. There is heavy fighting there.'

'The chart doesn't show it.'

'Still enough, I feel what glass and electrocrystal patterns do not. Damocles are in danger.'

'They are but one unit,' said another Leoparda general, speaking up. 'Surely the overall victory is paramount here? None can be spared or freed from the main assault to support them. Losses are... inevitable.'

The general fell silent as he realised he had said too much.

Petrok looked up, but there was compassion in his eyes. He knew how hard the Guardsmen had been driven to conquer the superior foe, and he knew how bitterly Phobor had railed at these men.

'You're right, sir,' he said. 'Lives must always be secondary to victory. But I will not see Iron Snakes wasted where waste is unnecessary.'

He turned, abruptly, and tugged his great power sword from the sheath the waiting swordbearer held. The bearer started in surprise. The blade, great Bellus, glowed and hummed as it breathed air again.

'What are you doing, master?' Rodos asked.

'What I must. Wait here. I will render my tactical survey to Captain Phobor when I return.'

Despite their fear and their awe of Petrok, the Guard officers began clamouring to a man. Phobor had left them with one task: to greet the great librarian and speed his assessment to the frontline. Fear for their lives made them question the huge, armoured figure in the doorway of the tent.

'Shut them up, lexicanium,' Petrok said softly as he strode outside, beyond the baying chatter of the soldiers.

As the Librarian made off across the green rock, towards the white heat, he could hear Rodos shouting 'Silence!' over and again.



IN A GREEN-ROCK defile on the eastern edge of Eidon City, washed by the stink of the phosphor vents so close nearby, Brother Andromak of Damocles Squad cursed Eidon in the name of every god he could remember as he blasted away with his plasma gun. In reply, enemy shots whickered down the gully and blew one of the biting-snake finials off the chapter standard he wore over his shoulders: the snake crest, double-looped.

'Back! Back!' snarled Brother Pindor from behind, half dragging Andromak towards the cover of the gully wall. 'There's no way through there!'

'I know it!' bellowed Andromak, fussing at his hot weapon, replacing a feed line that was about to melt out.

'Commander!'

Brother-Sergeant Priad heard Pindor's cry over the vox-link as he sheltered from a blistering enemy salvo behind a green boulder.

He tried to make sense of the terrain and find some gaps in the enemy fire. Curtly, he called Calignes, Illyus, and Xander forward.

They made a few metres before a round tore through Xander's shoulder plate and they dove for cover. Too heavy, too much!

Priad cursed. He'd rather be back home on Ithaka, hunting water-wyrm, than caught in a dead end like this.

He had cursed too when Captain Phobor had sent them east to act as a guard in case any of the dark foe tried to break out of the city as it fell. Priad had felt Damocles had been cheated of sharing the victory here. He had wanted his squad to join the main assault.

Now they were sidelined and all but forgotten. And none of them could have predicted the fierce fighting they would encounter. Priad couldn't explain it. It was as if the dark ones had already recognised their defeat and were fighting to retreat east out of the smelter-city. Damocles was the only unit in position to quell the retreat. Splinter-fire lanced around them.

Apothecary Memnes was beside Priad suddenly, dropping into cover from the sudden dash he had made. The faceplate of his helm was burnt and dented by a glancing shot.

'Memnes,' Priad growled. 'Explain this!'

'I can't, brother-sergeant,' the elderly warrior replied gruffly. 'We were meant to be a safeguard. So Phobor said. It feels like we're meeting the main force of the enemy.'

Priad fell silent. He surveyed the blistering firefight through the enhanced optics of his helmet. None had fallen so far. Andromak and Pindor were buffered in the gully. Calignes, Illyus, and Xander were pinned in the open. Natus, Scyllon, and Kules were ranged out behind the position he and Memnes shared.

A wall of fiery death rained down from the steep, stone slopes of Eidon City before them.

Apart from local vox-traffic between the members of the unit, communications was down, drowned out by the static of the erupting phosphor vents. Even through his respirator, Priad could smell the heat-stink of the fire-wells.

They could no longer even tell how the main assault was going. Perhaps Phobor and his squads were sprawled dead across the western bulwarks of the city. Perhaps they were alone.

Priad slowed his breathing to clear his mind. He looked across at Memnes, and though he saw nothing through his visor lenses except Memnes's buckled faceplate, he could sense the old, wise face beneath it, the compassion, the support.

You will make the right decision. We trust you. Damocles trusts you, brother-sergeant.

Priad flicked out the data-slate from his thigh pouch and checked again across the detailed light-map of the city's eastern approach. He studied the ground's swell, the access points, the fortifications. The Imperial planners had built it well.

And these dark eldar had taken it in a night.

Curse them! Damocles would do the same in an hour!

He slid a stud on the side of the slate and overlaid the structural data. It showed the density and thicknesses of the rock walls, the hard-points and pilings of the defences. It betrayed the actual physical weaknesses of the land and buildings they fought for.

Something... something...

And there was indeed something. Priad switched the overlay back and forth, matching and rematching. According to the old charts, there was a section of the east wall constructed from compacted rock-shards rather than ferro-concreted walls as an expediency for construction.

Priad felt his palms dampen with anticipation inside his gauntlets. He rolled onto his backside, his shoulders against the rock, and began to copy the data from the slate into a vox-message for Andromak. Dark eldar splinterfire stitched the green rock around him and covered Priad and Memnes with a fine, lime-green fire-dust.

'Andromak!' Priad rasped over the helmet vox to the squad's standard bearer. 'Open your data-link and stand by to receive!'

Andromak responded, a clipped atonal bark over the metallic vox. A red light on Priad's armour cuff glowed darkly to show the link was open, and Priad sent the vox-picture.

'I see it, brother-sergeant!' Andromak's tinny voice came back. 'You want me to hit it?'

'Count of four, Andromak. You have the plasma gun. Bring that wall down at its weak point. Damocles, stand ready to go on five. As soon as Andromak lays in, move out and follow through.'

His voice was a robotic, emotionless growl through the intercom vox, but eight voices responded as one, unfaltering. Even Apothecary Memnes, who was right beside him.

Priad checked his bolter and his lightning claw. The claw sizzled in the dry air, hungry for blood. Priad prayed to the lost soul of Brother-Sergeant Raphon, whose duty and command and lightning claw he had

inherited on Rosetta, to watch over Damocles now from his place high up in the Lost Heavens where the oceans surged forever and the Emperor knew each man's name and the wyrms rose eternally for the Great Hunt.

Let us be sharp and true and fast as a harpoon now, Priad thought. Raphon, make us take the foe as we would a wyrm rising from the seas, without flinching, without balking.

Make our thrust be the victory thrust.

Priad made the count.

On four, Andromak swept up out of cover and sent a blazing blue spear of plasma energy down the gully with pinpoint precision. Green rock exploded in a vomit of flame brighter and louder than the white heat crisping and fountaining along the horizon.

Damocles moved. Nine Space Marines broke from cover, firing as they went, gunning up at the walls.

Smoke washed across them.

They made ten metres, twenty.

Then Priad saw the wall. It was unbuckled, unbroken, still standing despite the oozing, molten burn Andromak's plasma gun had put in it.

The dark eldar, invisible in their positions above, renewed fire.

A splinter-shot clipped Scyllon's leg and spun him down.

Kules faltered as glancing shots whipped around him.

Natus went down, crying out, as his left arm came away raggedly at the shoulder in a spray of fire and blood and machine parts.

'Cover! Cover!' Priad yelled.

They fell into cover, Memnes dragging the crippled Natus into safety behind a rock. Enemy fire filled the air around and over them or chipped and shattered the rocks they clung behind. Crystal dust and weapon smoke washed across the approach.

Twenty metres. They had made just twenty metres, and still the wall stood.

The available cover was so slight that Priad was forced to lie face down in the green dust. He turned his head sideways and saw Illyus lying on his back next to him. A smoking hole had laid Illyus's visor open, and blood was dribbling out. Illyus had lost an eye and a cheek to a rebounding splinter round. Priad crawled over, pulling out his medical field pack, spraying jets of wound-wrapping plastex into the helmet hole. Illyus was still conscious. His fortitude was astonishing, even for a Space Marine. He mumbled some

poor joke to his brother-sergeant, though half his face was gone.

Priad could smell blood. He thought it was Illyus's until he realised that was impossible. He glanced down as saw the raw, black-edged hole in his own thigh. A splinter round had punched right through his armour and through the meat of his leg. There was no pain. Adrenaline was fighting the agony away – that and the augmented systems of his own body.

Later, there would be pain, but that was not his chief concern. He hoped Adeptus physique would be enough to fight the venoms and filths with which the Dark Ones coated their weapons.

But the wound had self-cauterised. He would not bleed out, at least.

'I smell the blood of a hero,' said a voice through the vox link.

'Who's that? Who speaks?'

Priad rolled over, daring more volleys of enemy fire from the fortifications above.

'Who?'

There was a figure behind them on the green rockside: an Iron Snake, tall, bare-headed, swathed in a cloak, stalking forward, oblivious to the rain of fire which doused the ground around him but miraculously left him unharmed. He held a sword aloft, a power sword that sung like the shrill keening of a water-wyrm.

Petrok! *It was great Petrok himself!*



PETROK DROPPED into cover beside Priad. 'Well met, brother-sergeant!' he grinned.

'Well met indeed, master!'

'Your leg wound. Does it pain you?'

'No, sir. I can move and fight if I have to, and I know I must.'

'You honour Karybdis with your bravery, leader of Damocles. Your men?'

Priad gestured sidelong to the nine Space Marines sheltering from the storm of fire.

'Natus is crippled, his arm gone. Illyus, there beside you, has been injured gravely. The rest are more or less intact.'

Petrok rolled over next to the sprawled Illyus. He looked down into his face. 'You'll have a noble scar, Illyus.'

'Thank you, sir.'

'Don't thank me. I didn't do it. The wound-wrap is holding and the blood is stemmed. You're strong. Your body will fight any venom or taint. I'll personally ensure you get the best new eye from the Mechanicus doctors if you'll fight with me.'

'Eye or not, I'll fight with you anywhere, any time!' Illyus said, fury in his voice. He rolled over and grabbed his fallen weapon.

Petrok looked across at Priad.

'A fine squad you have here, brother-sergeant.'

'Thank you, master.'

'Call me Petrok. It's quicker and simpler in the heat of battle. And I like my friends to know me by name.'

'Sir... Petrok...'

'Better, Priad. Now bring me to speed.'

Priad gestured across at the insurmountable fortifications. 'Captain Phobor sent us back here to watch for a retreat.'

'Typical of the captain's textbook moves,' Petrok mused with a grin that made Priad smile involuntarily.

'I didn't expect much. Truth is I thought we had been given a secondary role. But the resistance is huge, as if they are already breaking – guarding something important.'

'A good assessment, Priad. I... felt as much. So you know, Phobor is taking the city as we speak. But this here is unwarranted. I came personally because it troubled me. I hate to lose any of our ironclad brotherhood. You're a wyrm-killer yourself, aren't you, Priad?'

Priad started at the recognition and felt a flush of pride despite the tumult around them. 'It was my honour to take a wyrm, sir.'

'Petrok.'

'Petrok. Yes, in the summer of my admission. I took a wyrm with my first harpoon in the channel-ways beyond the Karybdis archipelago.'

'So I knew. A proud achievement. It took me three harpoons before I took my first. You should teach me sometime.'

'Sir... Petrok.' Priad was laughing despite himself.

'What do think they're guarding?' Petrok asked directly.

'I don't know,' Priad replied, suddenly serious. 'Something of value. Great value to them.'

'Indeed. Your tactics so far?'

Priad flexed his aching leg and checked his bolter clip. 'We assaulted, Petrok, as simple as that. When we ran foul, I tried to get

Andromak, my plasma bearer, to take out this section of wall, where a weakness seemed to be.'

Priad showed the slate to Petrok.

'But the gambit failed, and so we are now dug in.'

Petrok regarded the slate Priad had given him for a moment, as further splinter rounds cracked into the green rock around them. When Petrok put the slate down, it was covered in frost.

'You were right, Priad.'

'Sir?'

'Petrok, Petrok,' the librarian smiled at Priad. It was unnerving to see an unarmoured face. Priad almost shuddered.

'How was I right, Master Petrok?' he asked.

'You took your wyrm with the first cast, didn't you?'

'I was lucky.'

'How many others have done the same?'

'Very few, I suppose.'

'The water-wyrm is armoured and fierce. Sometimes you must expend several harpoons, despite the strength of your lance-arm, to kill the beast. So it has been in my experience.'

'What do you mean?'

Petrok rolled over again and adjusted his vox-link so he broadcast to the whole of Damocles.

'Wyrmes are hard to kill. You may know where to strike them but still it may take many casts, Brother Andromak. Prepare your plasma gun and repeat your strike on my command. Damocles, let us repeat our cast.'

Petrok looked back at Priad. 'With your permission, of course.'

'I grant it gratefully, but I'm not sure--'

'Any who is brave enough to take a wyrm with the first strike has not the benefit of knowing it is wise to strike again.'

'Now, Andromak!' Petrok bellowed.



BROTHER ANDROMAK swung back out of cover again and sent a boiling coil of plasma fire across at the walls. It blistered and scorched the Eidon City fortifications. As soon as the blast stopped, the enemy renewed their assault. A blitz of splinterfire and las-rounds hosed the

approach. Rock and earth threw up in thousands in individual impact-geysers. The green boulder sheltering Xander fractured and exploded, sending him scrabbling for better protection.

'Again, Andromak!' Petrok cried over the vox-link. 'Strike again.'

Andromak did, staying on his feet and taking a glancing deflection to the shoulder as he triggered his massive weapon.

Something shivered as his plasma fire touched it. A split low down branched up into jagged cracks. It was like watching a leafless tree grow. Andromak blasted again for good measure.

A section of wall buckled and tore down, spilling dark, shattered bodies with it. A further explosion blew the wall out. Debris rained down, and a tidal wave of green dust choked its way down the approach.

'Now! For Karybdis!' Petrok cried.

Enhancing their optics against the wall of smoke, Damocles Squad advanced behind him towards the breach.

Crushed, broken bodies lay in the rubble: black, lean, hooked things, or burst pallid fleshy things with gaping mouths. The marines choose not to look at either. They scrambled up the rubble after Petrok and Priad, bolters barking up into the darkness that welcomed them. The city's eastern flank was open to them, and they were biting into its innards.

Petrok led the way, his power sword shrieking in the air. Priad kept his distance from the charging librarian, blasting with his bolter, fanning the men into the breach.

Within ten minutes, they had captured the wall.

Petrok was pressing on, his sword cleaving through the defenders: shadowy, flickering beings who darted around him quickly, but none so quick as to avoid his blade. Bellus drank well of the dark kind's blood. Petrok left a trail of pieces behind him: severed scissorhands, cloven horned helmets, split torsos.

Damocles closed in after the great hero, following the trail of destruction. They moved wide in support, edging around into side corridors and chambers, flanking Petrok. The city had been raised centuries before, built from local stone cut into huge blocks and smoothed into almost seamless walls. Ornate light globes ran along walls or were suspended from the ceilings, and the white light reflected off the green stone, making everything lambent and pale. It reminded

Priad of the waters of Ithaka, of the times he had dove beneath into the green, into the silence.

There was no silence here. Rumbling blasts, screams, shrieks from the fallen foe, the chatter of bolters, and the wail of the plasma gun. Vox-traffic snapped back and forth between the space marines, and they could all hear the angry hum of Petrok's power sword. Priad ducked back as a salvo of rounds tore the corner off a wall before him, flaking green stone in all directions. Then he was on top of the foe, a gibbering thing in segmented red armour, its eyes yellow slits in its visor. It reeled at him with a bi-form blade weapon, raising a bladed firearm in the other clawed hand. Priad hit it with a bolter round that exploded in the middle of its chest and blew it clean across the chamber where it dropped, squealing, limbs thrashing in a death frenzy. Its blood painted semi-circles across the wall above it.

Andromak burned corridors and hallways out with his plasma gun, chanting the Hymn of Karybdis as he went. Any movement, any twitch of dark limb or slender blade, and he boiled the air of the chamber, scorching the stonework.

Calignes and Pindor found a way to the right held fast by piled furniture and flak boards. Single splinter shots stung down at them from the makeshift strong point. They rushed it together, their power and weight bringing the entire barricade down over the dark eldar defending it. There was a brief, confused hand-to-hand fight in the jumbled wreckage. Pindor shot one at close range and then smashed the head of another into the wall with his right fist. Calignes throttled the third.

They pushed on. Parted from Calignes briefly, Pindor found himself in a wide, featureless vault where enemy assassins leapt out from the shadows. He slew them all with his bolter and his knife, in a frenzied combat that lasted five or six seconds but which he would remember all his life.

Xander, Kules and Scyllon drove forward into a munitions bunker and butchered 40 dark eldar in a straight fight. Kules's spent bolter was glowing white-hot as he used it to cudgel an assailant before throwing it aside and laying in with his blade.

Natus, despite his wounds, kept up position outside with his bolter held in his remaining hand, pinking off the dark eldar as they ran, one by one.

Memnes half-carried Illyus forward, and the two of them laid down a crossfire which slaughtered the eldar things in a haze of thermite smoke and blood.

Priad was with Petrok, pushing into the depths of the eastern fortifications. The librarian's lightning claw, eager for victims, smote dark eldar into smouldering pieces as he advanced. His bolter rattled out its death knell.

Eldar exploded all around him, fell back and fell down, weeping bloody matter onto the tiled floor.

Petrok's power sword scythed through stone and brick and armour and flesh and left the sliced remains of the enemy as smoking meat-debris behind him. He sang the hunting song of the Ithakans as he fought. It was the old lay, the custom-verse of the wrym-hunters as they rowed out to find their pray. Priad found himself joining in, singing along with the great hero, rejoicing in the slaughter and the blood-fog.



PETROK BOWED forward, sinking over, his bloodied sword set with its tip on the Eidon City stone. He sighed.

'Master Petrok?' Priad said, blasting at the last of the scum who flickered and reared out of the stone-shadows about them.

'Phobor has taken the wall. Eidon City is ours. The Snakes have won the place.'

Priad faltered. 'Then why do you look so pale, master? Why so anguished?'

Petrok rose again, wiping blood from his cheek and raising the mighty power sword so that it sang in the air over his head. 'Because they are coming. The dark ones are coming. Fleeing in panic, they move this way, abandoning the west of the city. Can Damocles handle a real fight?'

'On my oath, they can!' Priad snarled.

Forty seconds later, Damocles Squad got to prove that boast.

Shrieking and fleeing from the city-breach, the vast forces of the dark eldar retreated east and met the lone warriors of Damocles Squad. The eldar were frenzied and keening by then, their senses of self-preservation entirely subsumed by their overwhelming need to escape. They gave no quarter, no sign of surrender or submission. They came as a

black-armoured torrent of thick, spiked evil that rushed out of the city like rats from a fire or water through a shattered dam.

Overwhelmed, Priad killed and killed again and went over in the tide of spiked monsters until Petrok hauled him up by the collar and set in beside him.

Side by side, Petrok with his blade and Priad with his claw, levelled the eldar into a heap twenty deep.

Blood was clogging the corridors now: rich, ruddy, stinking. Behind the eldar, the warriors of Damocles Squad closed the trap. Andromak was beside his commanders now, lancing his plasma beams into the choked confines, slaughtering dozens of the foe as they charged and panicked. Now Xander, his bolter coughing. Now Calignes and Pindor, smashing with their blades. Illyus, his face half gone, his weapon punching into the dark. Scyllon, Memnes, Kules. A slaughterhouse. A killing field. Ten Iron Snakes damming the tide of the dark eldar. And fallen Natus outside, singing the lay, shooting down each and every straggler who got past the deadly blockade.

Priad was washed with blood, and his bolter was dry-firing as Petrok pulled him to his feet.

'It is done, Priad. We have slain a thousand over and again.'

Priad pulled off his helmet and cast it to the ground. It floated away a few yards on a stream of enemy blood that gurgled down the hallway. The air was too close, too full of smoke and blood-vapour. They had expended virtually all of their ammunition and most of their physical strength. But they had killed infamous numbers. But for the evidence of the bodies around them, the scale of their victory was unimaginable.

'This day will be remembered by Damocles,' Priad whispered in the dampness and the dark. He began a small prayer of thanks to the Emperor.

'There is something else,' Petrok replied curtly, moving ahead. 'We're not done.'

They advanced through the corridors, clambering over the heaps of the slain, firing their bolters into the heads of anything that twitched.

Occasionally, the fierce heat of brother Andromak's plasma gun seared down the tunnel.

Memnes, old and trusted Memnes, was at Priad's side. 'This is wrong, something is wrong.'

Priad began to shake his head in reassurance, his lightning claw extended into the dark, but a voice echoed back to them.

'Memnes is right. Well felt, brother.' Petrok's voice in the dim light was loud and penetrating.

Priad formed Damocles up behind him and moved towards the voice of the librarian. He found Petrok looking down over a chasm where the white heat of the phosphor vents belched up eternally.

'Look,' Petrok said, pointing down with his great sword.

Priad craned and looked.

There were charges below, alien packets of explosives strapped to the vent walls. That was the dark eldar's final legacy. They had mined Eidon City and the phosphor vents. What they could not keep, no one would have.

'That explains the concentration of their strength at the east, and my... suspicion. The Dark Ones knew that we would best them today. They kept us fighting long enough to be able to set this trap.'

'Can we stop it?'

Petrok shrugged. 'Their materials are exotic and strange to us. I cannot guarantee understanding their explosive mechanisms.'

'Then what?' Memnes asked.

'We take them off,' Priad said directly. 'They've been placed here in order to trigger the phosphor seams. If we can't stop them exploding, we can at least ensure they explode away from their intended target.'

Petrok looked at him with clear, frank eyes. 'You're right. The only way. Even if these things have been made tamperproof or rigged to explode if touched, this is our duty.'

Petrok leaned down over into the vent and reached for the nearest charge packet. He had to use the tip of his sword to loosen its metal claws from the rock. He raised it slowly. A spiked black cube with a winking red telltale.

'Who's first?'

Memnes took it carefully, directly, and began to pace steadily down through the body-strewn corridors and out towards the breach in the wall. By the time he had disappeared from sight, another two charges had been pried loose and Xander and Scyllon were also on their way, nursing their deadly burdens.

Another came free and Andromak took it. Then one each for Illyus, Calignes, Pindor and Kules.

Petrok looked back from the open vent at Priad. Sweat coursed down his face, the sweat of stress perhaps, though Priad knew the up-wash of heat from the vent was huge. 'Four left,' Petrok said.

'Two each, then. We can't wait for any to return.'

'It'll be tricky managing two.'

'We'll do it.'

Petrok nodded as he reached lower to grab the last few. Priad had to hold onto Petrok's waist and legs so the librarian could get hold of the lowest-set charges. The four came out one by one.

Priad lifted his two. They were heavy, and he had no desire to treat them roughly. As it was, he was sure the red tell-tales were flashing faster than they had on Memnes's explosive.

Petrok hooked his sword in the loop of his belt and picked up the last two packets.

Priad was already walking.

Concentrating on keeping the bombs level and unshaken, it was difficult to remember the route immediately. Chaos had led them there, and the battle-scarred halls all looked the same.

Priad reached a junction and heard Petrok behind him urging him to go left. He did so. At another turn, he nearly slipped on the slick blood covering the floor.

The tell-tales were definitely flashing faster now. Light ahead through the green gloom. White heat, amber sky. The breach in the eastern wall of Eidon City where they had come in.

Priad and Petrok scrambled outside, trying to remain upright in the sloped rubble and slurry, trying to keep the packets steady. The rest of Damocles had fallen back down the gully approach into the cover of escarpment, leaving their packets scattered on the hill-slope away from the city wall. They cried out encouragement, urging haste, greater haste!

The sergeant and the librarian put their packages down with the others that the rest of Damocles had borne gently out of the captured city. They looked like a strange crop of dark fruit planted out in the desert dust. The lights were almost strobing a continuous red now.

'Run,' Petrok said.

Priad needed no encouragement. They raced together down the slope, crunching hard on the crystal rock, armour clanking, hydraulics buzzing. Priad heard the great librarian start to say something.

The charges exploded, an almost simultaneous ripple of air-splitting detonations. A flash of white heat brighter than the vents. A solid wall of shock-force that hurled them both like harpoons.



FINGERS OF black smoke and a huge pall of dust stained the amber sky above Eidon City. Air-support and the dark bug-shapes of supply vessels and troop-landers cut low through the haze.

At the staging post above the western approach, the Imperial forces were celebrating their victory, and the massed Iron Snakes were hailing their captain-hero Phobor. Great voices were raised in chanting song, gauntlets slapped against armour plate. The Rite of the Sharing of Water had been made, and now the Iron Snakes rejoiced their triumph.

Petrok and the men of Damocles Squad returned when the revelries were in full swing. Night was falling by then, and patterns of stars were winking in the clear sky above the veil of smoke. There were great lights up there too, the running lights of orbiting Imperial battleships and escort vessels. Already news of the successful reclamation was speeding through the Warp to their great chapter headquarters on Ithaka.

Below, in the camps, braziers were lit, and drums were being beat. As their men were breaking camp and heading for the troopships and the next warzone, small groups of pale, fearful Guard officers were being marched away under guard, bound for the punishment ships. Phobor's orders. They had failed. They would pay.

The noise of armoured vehicles and artillery units preparing to disembark filled the smoky evening. On the dark roadways below, lines of firelights and vehicle lamps wound in snakes. Above, the clouds thundered as support ships brought technicians and workers back in to re-man the foundries.

'Master! I had become most concerned for your well-being!' began Lexicanium Rodos as Petrok reappeared. He clapped his hands, and the midget things scurried out of the darkness to take Bellus and the librarian's blackened gauntlets.

'I'm well enough,' Petrok said. 'Call up more staff. See to these men.' Priad led Damocles Squad into the camp. Andromak and Xander were half-carrying Natus, and Memnes supported Illyus. Before accepting any help or acknowledging anyone else present, Priad formed Damocles into a circle and had Memnes conduct the Rite of the Sharing of Water to mark the end of their fight. Then they could rest, celebrate, be tended to.

Rodos observed the rite, waited until it was over, then barked more orders for surgeons and chapter servants. Figures darted out of the awning tents, some carrying supplies or medical tools. Illyus and Natus were taken to the healing tents immediately.

Petrok watched, making sure the squad were well attended.

'He was looking for you,' Rodos told the librarian quietly, from behind.

'Phobor?' Petrok asked, turning.

Rodos nodded. 'He wasn't pleased. It seemed to take the edge of the victory for him that he didn't have you running around, heeding his every order.'

'There were other things to do. More important things.'

Rodos nodded. 'I do not question you, master. But he will. Now it looks...'

Rodos's voice trailed off. Phobor had appeared, powerful and dark against the fires. His scarred face had a grim set to it. The flames flashed off the double-headed snake crest on his shoulder-plates.


'Petrok! I wondered where you had got to. My directions were clear enough. I wanted an appraisal of my tactics.'

Petrok took a drink from a goblet one of the midgets offered him before replying. 'Your tactics were perfect. You proved that by taking the city, for the love of the Emperor. You had no need of me.'

Phobor shrugged. He was one of the iron-clad warriors, Petrok knew. Total discipline, total courage. No imagination. No... soul.

'You have commended your men for the victory?' Petrok said.

'Aye, all of them,' Phobor nodded.

'Perhaps not all. Let me tell you about Damocles and what was achieved on the other side of the city today. Let me tell you of another war, of steadfast courage and of white heat.' 

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BLOOD BROTHERS

script Gordon Rennie art Mike Perkins

THE BADLANDS SOUTH OF THE CIVILISED LANDS OF THE OLD WORLD, HOME TO COUNTLESS WARRING ORC AND GOBLIN WARLORDS. NOW ONE OF THESE AMBITIOUS ORC WARLORDS IS ON THE MARCH, LAYING SIEGE TO THE FORTRESS OF A NECROMANCER LORD.



NORMAL SIEGE TACTICS DO NOT WORK AGAINST THE UNDEAD. YOU CANNOT STARVE THEM INTO SUBMISSION, YOU CANNOT BREAK THEIR SOULLESS WILL. ONLY BY **RELENTLESS ATTACK** CAN YOU DEFEAT THEM, AND FOR **THREE LONG AND BLOODY DAYS** NOW THE FORTRESS AND ITS UNDEAD DEFENDERS HAVE WITHSTOOD THE ORC ASSAULT--



UNTIL NOW, THAT IS...



I AM PLEASED, LEECH-THING.
MY WARBOSSSES CLAIMED
THE NECROMANCER'S FORT-
RESS WAS *IMPREGNABLE*,
BUT UNDER YOUR COMMAND
MY ARMIES HAVE TAKEN
ONLY *THREE DAYS* TO
BREACH ITS WALLS!

THEN REMEMBER
OUR *DEAL*,
GREENSKIN.

I HAVE DELIVERED THE FORTRESS TO YOU,
BUT THE NECROMANCER'S COMMANDER
MUST *NOT* BE HARMED.

I ALONE RESERVE THE RIGHT TO
FACE HIM IN SINGLE COMBAT TO THE DEATH.
AFTER THAT, MY SERVICE TO YOU IS *OVER*.

OVER? NO...

AFTER THIS, WE MARCH
ON THE GOBLIN TRIBES
OF THE DRAGONBACK
MOUNTAINS, AND THAT
SHALL ONLY BE THE
BEGINNING OF OUR
CONQUESTS...

HIS NAME IS *AMALRIC*, AND THE GREENSKIN'S TREACHERY
DOES *NOT* SURPRISE HIM.

TO THE
NORTH IS THE GREAT
PRIZE OF BARAK-VARR -
AND BEYOND THAT ARE
THE LANDS THE HUMANS CALL
THE BORDER PRINCES.
SERVE ME AND I SHALL
REWARD YOU WELL.

AFTER SO LONG A LIFE
AS HIS, THE PETTY DOGS
OF WOULD-BE CON-
QUERORS ARE CHILD
PLAY TO PREDICT!

VUNNCH

HOW MANY, HE WONDERS.

HOW MANY LIVES HAS HE TAKEN?

HOW MANY BATTLES HAS HE FOUGHT?

HOWEVER MANY, IT CAN NEVER BE *ENOUGH*..

NOT TO QUENCH THE *RISING BLOODTIDE* WITHIN HIM. NOT TO STEM THE *ETERNAL CRAVING* THAT CONSUMES HIM.

NO. NEVER ENOUGH.

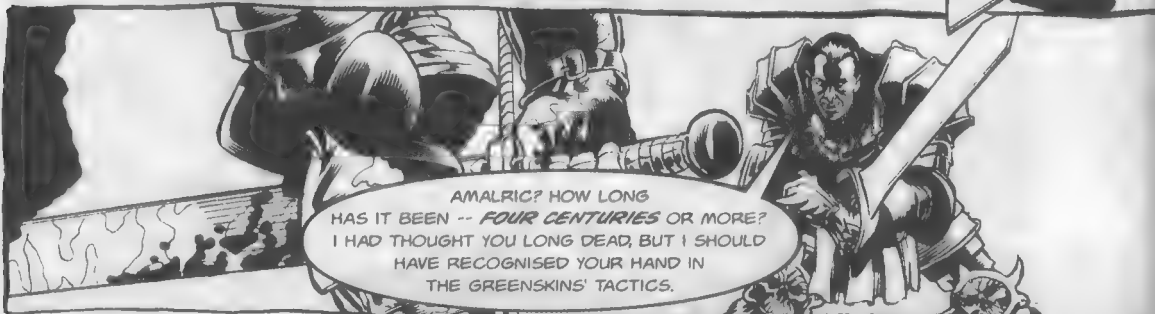
HE FIGHTS ON, BARELY EVEN NOTICING AS HIS STEED IS CUT DOWN FROM UNDER HIM. HE KILLS EVERYTHING IN HIS WAY, LITTLE CARING WHETHER IT IS ORC OR UNDEAD THING.



THEY MEAN NOTHING TO HIM, THESE THINGS. ENEMY OR ALLY, LIVING OR UNDEAD, THEY ARE MERELY OBSTACLES IN HIS PATH.



DIVERSIONS TO BE OVERCOME ON THE WAY TO HIS TRUE OBJECTIVE!



AMALRIC? HOW LONG HAS IT BEEN -- *FOUR CENTURIES* OR MORE? I HAD THOUGHT YOU LONG DEAD, BUT I SHOULD HAVE RECOGNISED YOUR HAND IN THE GREENSKINS' TACTICS.

THEY ARE THE SAME ONES YOU USED IN THE *SIEGE OF ADESSA*, ARE THEY NOT, AND WHO NOW EVEN REMEMBERS THAT MAGNIFICENT BATTLE THESE THOUSAND YEARS HENCE?



YES, '*BROTHER*', IT IS GOOD TO SEE YOU AGAIN...



...IF ONLY BECAUSE I NOW
KNOW THAT I'LL FINALLY HAVE
THE PLEASURE OF KILLING
YOU THIS DAY!

THEY MEET IN A CLASH OF WEAPONS,
AND AMALRIC REMEMBERS
ANOTHER DUEL, ANOTHER BATTLE...

ONE THOUSAND YEARS AGO, AT THE TIME OF THE ARABY CRUSADES,
WHEN A PARTY OF BRETONNIAN KNIGHTS MET AN OPPONENT FAR
BEYOND EVEN THEIR MATCH IN ONE OF THE ANCIENT DESERT TOMB-CITIES!

SHRUKK!!

HAH! SO THESE
ARE THE BEST WARRIORS THE
SO-CALLED OLD WORLD
HAS TO OFFER...!?

WHAT **ARROGANCE**
TO CALL YOURSELVES 'OLD
WORLDERS'. YOU, WHOSE ANCESTORS
WERE STILL LIVING AS **CAVE ANIMALS**
WHEN THE MIGHTY CITIES OF **LANMIA**
AND **KHEMRI** TOWERED OVER
THESE DESERTS!

YOU CAN DIE HERE,
YOUR BLOOD LEAKING OUT
INTO THE DESERT SANDS,
OR YOU CAN ACCEPT THE
GIFT I OFFER YOU.

I HAVE DEFEATED
YOU ALL IN SINGLE COMBAT.
SOME OF YOU FOUGHT WELL
ENOUGH TO BE SPARED THIS FAR.
TO THOSE OF YOU STILL LIVING,
I OFFER **THIS CHOICE**...

THE CHOICE
IS YOURS --
**DEATH
OR LIFE
ETERNAL!**

ORDAINED INTO THE RANKS OF THE *ORDER OF THE BLOOD DRAGONS*, THE SURVIVING BRETONNIANS RODE OUT OF THE LAND OF THE DEAD, ALL THOUGHTS OF *HONOUR* AND *CRUSADING GLORY* FORGOTTEN...



REPLACED BY A FRENZIED LUST FOR BLOOD AND *THE BUTCHERY OF BATTLE!*



FOR CENTURIES, THEY SLAUGHTERED THEIR WAY ACROSS THE OLD WORLD, SEEKING ONLY THE THRILL OF BATTLE, UNTIL AT LAST THEY WERE *BETRAYED BY ONE OF THEIR OWN.*




PERHAPS ONE OF THESE VAMPIRE KNIGHTS FINALLY SICKENED OF THE SLAUGHTER, OR ENCOUNTERED SOMETHING THAT *AWOKE SOME DIM SPARK OF HUMANITY* IN HIS *BLOOD-DAMNED SOUL.*



WHATEVER IT WAS, THE END RESULT WAS THE SAME--




BETRAYED TO THEIR ENEMIES, THE ORDER OF UNDEAD KNIGHTS WAS DESTROYED, THE SURVIVORS SCATTERING ACROSS THE FACE OF THE OLD WORLD, AND HUNTED DOWN THROUGH THE CENTURIES BY ONE WHO WAS ONCE THEIR *BROTHER...*




FOR ONLY BY WIPING OUT HIS
FORMER BRETHREN CAN HE
REDEEM THE DAMNATION AND
DISHONOUR THAT STAINS
HIS VERY SOUL!

BARBUDO.
VALLIER, PICARDO, GUISCARD.
DO YOU REMEMBER THOSE
NAMES, *RAYNAUD*?




BARBUDO AND VALLIER
I FOUND QUICKLY AND EASILY.
I FOUND PICARDO IN THE COLD
WASTES OF NORSCA.
GUISCARD CAME TO FIND
ME INSTEAD.




I KILLED
THEM ALL. AND
NOW I'VE COME
FOR YOU.

THEY DIED
BECAUSE THEY WERE
WEAK, AMALRIC, JUST AS YOU
ARE WEAK. TOO WEAK TO
DESERVE THE POWER
THAT HAS BEEN GIVEN
TO US.



YOU WERE NEVER
ONE OF US, WE SHOULD
HAVE LEFT YOU TO *DIE* IN THE
DESERT WITH THE REST
OF THE *UNWORTHY*
ONES!



LET ME SHOW
YOU JUST HOW FAR
THIS '*WEAKNESS*' OF
MINE WILL TAKE US..!

'UUUGH' -
'WEAK',
RAYNAUD?



SMASH!



DO YOU
REMEMBER, RAYNAUD? DO
YOU REMEMBER THE *CODE OF
HONOUR AND CHIVALRY*
WE ONCE SWORE
TO FOLLOW?



LOOK AT THE
THINGS WE HAVE BECOME.
SEE HOW FAR WE HAVE
FALLEN FROM WHAT
WE ONCE WERE..!



SHUNK!



'HHGG'... IS. IS
THIS WHAT YOU WANT,
AMALRIC... THAT WE
BOTH DIE HERE
TOGETHER..?

NO, NOT
TOGETHER...



SNAPT!



DEATH IS
ALL I DESIRE--



THE DUEL WON, AMALRIC TAKES HIS PRIZE, ADDING HIS DYING AND DEFEATED ENEMY'S STRENGTH AND KNOWLEDGE TO HIS OWN.

FOR THE VICTOR, STRENGTH AND LIFE ETERNAL FOR THE VANQUISHED, DEATH AND OBLIVION. SUCH IS THE WAY OF THE ORDER OF THE BLOOD DRAGONS.

HIS WOUNDS WILL HEAL IN TIME, SOONER WITH HIS ENEMY'S STOLEN LIFE ENERGY, BUT AMALRIC IS ALREADY THINKING OF THE NEXT BATTLE TO COME.

HIS MIND FILLS WITH RAYNAUD'S STOLEN MEMORIES, AND FROM THESE HE LEARNS OF A GREAT GATHERING OF HIS KIND IN THE NORTH--

NORTH, TO SYLVANIA, AND ONE STEP CLOSER TO THE LONGED-FOR DEATH THAT AWAITS HIM WHEN HIS QUEST IS FINALLY OVER.



DARK FORCES ARE STIRRING IN SYLVANIA AGAIN, AND FROM ALL OVER THE OLD WORLD THE UNDEAD ARE GATHERING BENEATH THE BANNERS OF THE HOUSE OF VON CARSTEIN. IF HIS REMAINING BRETHREN ARE TO BE FOUND ANYWHERE, IT WILL BE THERE.



THE END



TYBALT'S QUEST

BY GAV THORPE

THE STENCH OF death hung heavily in the cloying fog. The broken shadows of twisted trunks and branches swayed fitfully in the lacklustre breeze. Tybalt dismounted from his great black stallion, his armour dripping with moisture from the swirling mist. Casting his gaze around to find something to fix his horse's reins to, the Bretonnian knight spied what looked to be an old hitching post by the cemetery's gate. As he led his steed towards it, the heavy footfalls of his armoured boots and the horses' iron-shod hooves muffled by the dense fog, Tybalt's eyes and ears strained to sense any other sound. All was still and silent. Even the hoots of owls and the baying of dogs from the village had fallen quiet.

Quickly tying the reins to the rotted post, Tybalt unsheathed his longsword and took one last look around. Above him, the light of the new moon could barely be seen through the misty blanket surrounding the hilltop. The twinkling lights of Moreux had been left far behind as he had made his way to the ancient graveyard overlooking the whole of the valley. Up

here, in one of the narrower passes of the Grey Mountains, the air was thin, and even the fit and youthful Tybalt was finding himself short of breath. With a deep inhalation, the knight laid a gauntleted hand on the cemetery gate, the curled ironwork of which stretched several feet above his head, and pushed it open.

The shrieking of rusted hinges rent the air, causing Tybalt to involuntarily freeze. His heart was hammering in his chest, and it was a few moments before he realised that he had been holding his breath. Letting it out slowly, he eased the gate open further, an action accompanied by erratic squeaks and grinding noises. When he'd opened a gap just wide enough for him to pass, he turned sideways and slid himself through the opening, looking up at the gargoyles on the flanking gateposts. Both had probably been identical when sculpted, but now the one to the left had only one of its three twisting horns left, while the lolling tongue of the other had been broken off just outside its fanged mouth.

Treading carefully to avoid the deepest puddles in the uneven path, Tybalt made his way further up the hill, heading towards the blocky, dark shadows of the largest and oldest crypts at the summit. Something scuttling through the darkness banged into his foot, causing Tybalt to stumble in fright. As he fell to one knee, he came face to face with the evil, yellow eyes of a black rat. The verminous scavenger hissed at him and then scampered out of view. Heaving himself to his feet once more, Tybalt wiped the mud from his left hand on his scarlet and azure quartered surcoat. For a moment, Tybalt wondered if he should go back to his horse to fetch his shield, but decided that a free hand would be more valuable in these treacherous environs. Pausing to collect his thoughts, Tybalt peered through the mist at the looming shapes of the old mausoleums at the cemetery's highest point, wondering which belonged to Duke Laroche, the resting place of the ghost who had appeared to him in a dream five months earlier.

The long-dead duke had warned Tybalt that a great evil was disturbing his rest, and that he should undertake a quest to halt this darkness spreading through the realm. It had taken four months of searching the length of Bretonnia, examining the oldest heraldic records, to identify the arms of the ghost who had appeared to him: a black eagle on a plain yellow field. Duke Laroche was one of the founders of Mousillon, a man whose family dated back to the settling of Bretonnia in the time of Gilles le Breton, the first king. For the last month, Tybalt had searched far and wide for the old duke's resting place, until finally he had come across the answer in the chapel records in the small mountain village of Moreux.

When the commoners had learned that Tybalt was heading up to the old graveyard, the commoners back in Moreux had warned him against going to the ancient cemetery. Local superstition was rife with tales of ghouls and spectres haunting the heights of the mountains. Hearing these accounts had done little to ease Tybalt's nerves.



TYBALT'S thoughts were interrupted by rustling behind him and he spun around, sword at the ready. Taking a few steps back down the path, his grey eyes tried to pierce the gloom. Shadows drifted in and out of focus with the rolling fog, and Tybalt heard more rustling. Taking another cautious step forward, the knight brought his sword back over his shoulder, ready to strike at a moment's notice. More scuffling swung his attention to his left, and he stepped off the muddy path into the wet grass, which reached up to his thighs. Tybalt could hear an inhuman snuffling noise, accompanied by deep breathing and intermittent grunting. Something was approaching slowly

towards him; he could see its vague shadow only a few paces away now.

'Reveal yourself, rascal!' challenged Tybalt, trying to speak with a confidence his shaking hand betrayed he did not have. There was an unearthly squeal and the shadow leapt at him from the darkness.

'Die, spawn of blackness!' Tybalt cried, stepping sideways and bringing his heavy sword flashing down. The blade bit deep into flesh, and blood fountained through the mist, splashing across Tybalt's surcoat and armour. Ensuring the beast was no longer moving, Tybalt took a closer look. At first he thought it some hideous mutant, but as he bent down to look into the thick weeds, he saw that the long tusks did not belong to some creature of the netherworlds and were in fact those of a wild boar. Tybalt straightened up slowly and the tension suddenly released from his body.

'Lady, protect me from fears and nightmares of my own creation,' he laughed quietly to himself, turning quickly and striding back to the path. The sudden action and its mundane end had eliminated all of the knight's trepidation now, and as he looked about, he saw nothing more unnatural than the heavy mist of the mountains, hanging over a place where the dead quietly rested in eternal sleep. With more of a spring in his step, he walked up the twisting path towards the summit.



TYBALT FOUND Duke Laroche's tomb towards the centre of the hilltop, identifying it by the deep inscription and the coat of arms whose yellow and black paint had been all but obliterated by the ceaseless march of the centuries. Hacking away at the twining ivy and stubby bushes surrounding the crypt, Tybalt made his way around to the

back of the tomb, away from the cemetery gates, where ancient tradition dictated the entrance stone would be.

On turning the corner, Tybalt was momentarily taken aback. The portal was already half open! The young knight's ears could hear nothing from inside the tomb, and so he ventured forward once more. Peering into the darkness of the mausoleum's interior, he could not discern anything untoward, and he quickly set to with his tinder and flint to make a torch from one of the many broken branches scattered across the ground. The brand sputtered and smoked badly. The wood was dead but wet from the recent rains and the vapours swirling around the graveyard.

As he was about to step over the threshold of the tomb, Tybalt glanced down and stopped. Muddy footprints could be seen quite clearly leading into the darkness. Kneeling for a closer look, he saw that there were several sets, all overlapping but made by the same pair of boots. Judging from the length of the strides, Tybalt guessed that the man was fairly short. He then noticed scuffing on the imprints of the right boot which could mean that he either had a limp or perhaps was carrying a heavy burden. Tybalt was glad that he had spent much of his childhood with his father's personal huntsman, learning some of the man's tracking secrets. Deciding there was no more to be learned here, Tybalt stood up and took a few steps forward, into the tomb itself.

Looking around in the ruddy, flickering glow of his torch, Tybalt could see the walls were hung with ancient tapestries, each depicting some event from Duke Laroche's life. Here was the duke repelling the green-skinned orcs from his castle walls near to what would become the city of Mousillon. Another showed the duke winning the Tourney of Couronne, claiming the silver helm from the Fay Enchantress herself. Another showed Laroche at court with the King of his times, his armour almost white with the brilliance of its polish. There were also scenes from his daily life, such as the duke

out hawking in the mountains, his wedding to the Lady Isabon, and the knighting of his son. The largest tapestry, almost a dozen paces in length, depicted various tableaux from his Grail Quest. It showed the duke driving forth foul beastmen of Chaos from the hallowed woods of Lapelle, his founding of the Grail Temple at Mousillon and his solitary two-month vigil in the Grey Mountains during which the Lady of the Lake had guided him to one of the Grail's resting places.

Spurred on by the visitation of the duke's ghost, who had given him such dire warnings of evil to come that Tybalt had woken with a shudder and covered in sweat despite the autumn night chill, the knight had vowed to his father that he would seek out this evil, wherever it would be found. It was his father who first directed him to the massive heraldic library at Couronne. During his research, Tybalt had learnt much of the duke and had come to see him as a shining example of the true Bretonnian knight. Records told of a man who was pure and holy, pious in every way, noble to his servants and his peers. His humility had been near-legendary in his time and his ultimate sacrifice, saving the Queen's life from a traitor's blade, had been a glorious end to a glorious life. And now the duke had appeared to Tybalt, asking him for help. Tybalt was honoured that such a hero of his lands had faith in him.

Tybalt noticed that the tapestry at the far end of the chamber was hanging askance, obviously moved by someone. Combined with the footprints by the entrance, this convinced Tybalt that someone had been down here. Or perhaps they were still down here, Tybalt realised with a start. Easing his sword from its scabbard, Tybalt stepped cautiously towards the skewed tapestry, pushing it to one side with the tip of his sword. There was an archway beyond, and in the fitful light he could see that the burial chamber on the other side of the archway was empty of life. Glancing up, Tybalt noticed an inscription in the stonework above the archway. Raising the torch above his head, Tybalt

Gilles himself rested the night before he descended to claim the lands south of the mountains for his people,' explained Laroche. 'Here is the place that our First King did witness the first visitation of the Lady of the Lake, and from here did all his knowledge and power spring. Even before the coming of the King, this land was a holy one, for our ancestors beyond the founding of the realm of Bretonnia did labour hard here to build the cairns for their dead lords. The very hill itself is but a gigantic tomb of the resting dead, from the time when the elves and dwarfs ruled the lands and our people were but scattered hunting tribes.'

Tybalt gulped heavily in amazement.

'How could such a place be forgotten, milord?' he asked, shaking his head in disbelief.

'Tis the way of things, young knight.' The old duke replied simply, stroking an incorporeal hand through his dark hair. 'Ages pass, the world changes, the old ways are replaced by new ways, the ancient secrets and beliefs give way to the wonders of the modern age. It is the duty of the Grail Knights to keep that true wisdom alive, but there are fewer of us with every passing generation. A darkness threatens all of our lands, and the realms of others to the north, south, east and west. A time of great change is coming, young knight, a time of war and disorder. We shall need men such as thyself. Verily, there shall be such need of heroes the like of which time has never seen before!'

Tybalt was about to ask what darkness was coming, but the duke held up a hand to silence him. The knight saw that the duke's gloves were made from the blackest velvet, and on every finger was a golden ring bearing the crests of the eight great families of the founding of Mousillon.

'But that is the future, not thy current quest, valiant Tybalt,' the apparition finally said. 'For now, you must fight against the hideous attentions of a dabbler in the black arts of necromancy.'

'Necromancy, milord?' Tybalt asked, unsure of the word's meaning.

'Tis the power to summon the forces of Death and Undeath and bind them to thy bidding,' the duke answered, his ghostly form stepping back to lean against the coffin. 'Tis the power to raise corpses from thy graves to dance in unholy rites and march to war against the living. 'Tis the power to steal life with a touch of the finger. 'Tis the power to gaze past the gates of Death itself and peer at that which lies beyond. 'Tis the power to forever forestall the coming of the eternal sleep, so that thou might never know Death.'

The duke stood up once more, his fists clenched by his sides in anger.

'One who has these powers hath come here,' he spat. 'To this site, that which is the most holy of places. He hath disturbed mine own slumber and that of others of your great ancestors. He yet will rise the bodies of the dead to sweep all before him, his vile blackness spreading like spilt ink across a clean parchment. Thou must stop him, Tybalt, that is why I brought thee here.'

'I should have brought my father's army!' exclaimed Tybalt, raising his hand to his mouth in horror. 'This foul creature would have no chance against a hundred sturdy men and knights.'

'Thou canst not defeat such an evil with battle alone, young Tybalt,' Laroche answered. 'They feed on fear, thrive on thy terror. From the fallen ranks, he wouldst summon more from their graves to do his bidding. Nay, an army is not needed, for is not a knight of Bretonnia strong enough to overcome all obstacles? Is not the Lady the most powerful of allies? 'Tis faith that will break this darkness, and faith does not come from an army, but from one knight who will stand alone against the perils of the world.'

'I do not understand, milord,' Tybalt protested. 'What can I do against a man who can raise an army from the very ground at my feet?'

'You can fight him,' the duke replied shortly, his eyebrows raised in humour. The duke then paused a moment, his head turning as if to look through the wall of the tomb.

'The beast cometh now!' he hissed. 'Gird your arms, and do battle, brave knight. Take mine silver helm, for it wilt protect thee from the worst of the devil's magicks. The Lady is with you, brave Tybalt, so look to your faith for strength, and you will endure and overcome.' With a reassuring smile, the ghost of Duke Laroche began to waver and then was gone.



STANDING ON the crest of the hill, Tybalt could just make out a faint lightness in the mist, moving slowly towards him. As it grew closer, he saw that it was the glow of a flame, and it was not long before he could make out the figure of a man walking lopsidedly along the path. He had wisely extinguished his own torch, fearing he would reveal his presence too soon, and as the stranger came closer, he stepped behind one of the nearby tombs. Another dozen heartbeats passed before he could hear the scuffing of the newcomer's twisted leg as well as the intruder's laboured wheezing and a constant whispering in a tongue the knight did not understand. Pushing himself even further into the shadows, Tybalt waited for his adversary to come closer. The shuffling footfalls stopped at the summit, no more than a dozen strides from his hiding place. Tybalt eased his sword into a position ready to strike, and he waited for his foe to limp within easy reach of his blade. He heard the man give a hacking cough, and then a voice called out in accented Bretonnian.

'Show yourself, knight! I know you are here waiting!'

Tybalt felt his stomach tighten with fear, and he fought down the sick feeling. Blinking quickly to clear the moisture in his eyes, he took a deep breath and then stepped out of the shadows to confront the stranger. The man was indeed short,

no more than five feet tall. His right leg was crooked below the knee, splaying his foot outwards. He was dressed in a heavy, grey robe fastened with a frayed length of rope. In one hand, he held a knobbled, wooden staff, the tip of which was glowing with an unnatural flame. Under the other arm, the man carried a heavy book bound in leather and brass. The man was looking the other way, and all Tybalt could see of his face was a bulbous nose surrounded by a wild shock of greasy, grey hair. The stranger then turned to face him, his face old and lined with many deep wrinkles like a carelessly discarded blanket. A scraggly growth of beard sprouted from his chin and cheeks, but the eyes that stared at him from under thick bushy brows were bright and lively.

'There are you!' the figure said, taking several steps closer. 'I came as quick as I can. Did not want you to get cold waiting for me.'

'Approach no closer, creature of evil,' Tybalt warned, brandishing his sword towards the necromancer, who took a step back.

'Creature of evil?' the necromancer replied. 'Who told you such things?'

'The duke has warned me of the vile deeds you are committing' Tybalt said proudly, lowering his blade slightly.

'The duke?' the magic user replied excitedly, his sharp gaze meeting Tybalt's own defiant stare. 'Then it is true, a spirit can come back across the void! Oh, wondrous!'

'Leave, and never trouble these lands again,' Tybalt told the man facing him in his most commanding voice.

'Leave?' the necromancer replied incredulously, his head tilted to one side in astonishment. 'When I am so near to finishing my work here? I do not think so! Get out of my way, and I will spare you.'

'You shall not pass me while I draw breath!' Tybalt threatened, bringing his sword up once more.

'So be it,' the necromancer sneered, pointing his staff towards the knight. The foreigner spoke two words in a harsh, clipped voice, and the flame of the staff roared out to engulf Tybalt.

The knight felt Laroche's silver helm growing colder, and the flames licked around him without touching, keeping him safe from harm. The flames continued, and the necromancer took a step back in dismay when the uninjured Tybalt strode from the magical fires, his eyes filled with murderous intent, his sword still stained with the boar's blood, raised for a lethal strike. With surprising speed, the evil wizard lashed out with the staff, cracking it against the side of Tybalt's helm. Dizzied, the knight lurched to one side, his outstretched hand finding the wall of a tomb to brace himself against. When he looked around, the necromancer had disappeared into the mists, the glow of the staff nowhere to be seen. Tybalt could feel a small trickle of blood running down his left cheek from where his helm had broken the skin, and his jaw felt numb. Blinking back the tears of shock, he pushed himself upright and began searching for the fleeing magic user.



TYBALT HAD wandered aimlessly for some time, trying to find the necromancer's hiding place. He had walked back along the length of the path and was sure his prey had not left the cemetery. It was at the gate that he had another revelation. The necromancer had only known he was in the cemetery because the black stallion he'd tied up by the gate! There had been nothing mystical about his knowledge at all. The man's magic was hardly as all-powerful as the knight had at first believed. Checking on his horse, the knight found it unharmed, and Tybalt suspected that the vile wizard had decided to steal the fine steed once his owner had been killed.

'This is fruitless!' Tybalt hissed to himself in frustration. The graveyard was large, and in the dense mist it was impossible to see anything at all beyond

two dozen yards. What was it the duke had said? Faith would see him victorious? Shrugging, Tybalt stuck his sword in the ground, knelt on one knee and bowed his head to its pommel.

'Oh glorious Lady of the Lake, who watches over our King and lands, guide me to this evil man so that I may slay him in your name,' he prayed, eyes still flickering from side to side, alert from danger. He knelt for almost 30 heartbeats, but nothing happened. With a sigh, he closed his eyes for a second, and suddenly his mind was filled with a vision. Blinking, Tybalt closed his eyes once more and concentrated. In his mind's eye, he could see the necromancer in a narrow depression which the knight somehow knew was on the other side of the hill. The wizard had his spellbook open on the top of a low tomb in front of him and was chanting verses of magic from its pages. The air around him was shifting and changing, ruffled and rippled by the movement of unquiet spirits. Focusing his mind even more, Tybalt caught the noise of the wizard's words, and as he opened his eyes once more, he found he could still faintly hear them. Following his ears, Tybalt began to move around the base of the hill, staying close to the high, dry stone wall that served as the cemetery's boundary.



TYBALT WAS creeping up the hillside, closing in on the necromancer's ritual. Stealthily he wove his way through the mass of gravestones, glad that his armour was well oiled and did not make too much noise. As he made his way between the graves, Tybalt's foot caught in something, pitching him forward onto his hands and knees. Thinking it a bramble or similar, he tugged hard, but to no avail. Glancing back he gave a high pitched yelp. A bony hand protruded

from the ground and was grasping his ankle!

As the knight tried to wrench his leg free, another arm broke through the surface, and then the skeleton's skull pushed free, its fleshless grin leering at the knight from the dead creature's grave. Tybalt smashed the skull in two with his sword, and the dead thing's grip relaxed.

Pushing himself up, Tybalt realised other shapes were pressing through the mist towards him. Preferring not to be trapped in the tightening ring of dead creatures, he jumped towards the nearest, lashing out with his blade. The sword crashed through the skeleton's ribs and spine, toppling it to the ground in two parts. Turning to face the others, he counted four more adversaries. Dodging to one side, he realised that three of the four were armed and armoured with ancient-looking axes and maces. One still carried a shield on its left arm, while all four wore scattered fragments of mail armour.

'Lady, give me strength!' Tybalt hissed as the nearest undead creature lashed out with its rusty-bladed axe, the blow falling wide as Tybalt swayed to his left. Tybalt brought his sword around in a long, backhand sweep, smashing the skeleton several feet backwards. Tybalt stepped forward, thrusting forward with the point of his blade, embedding it deep into the creature's chest. The magic binding it to the world of the living severed, and the thing collapsed into a pile of mouldering bones. Fleshless hands grabbed at Tybalt's neck, and he spun on the spot, ramming his elbow into the face of the skeleton which had attacked him, its jaw flying into the fog. Too close to use his sword, Tybalt brought his knee up sharply and was rewarded by the sound of splintering ribs.

Tybalt was staggered sideways as a mace crashed into his shoulder, and as he stumbled he brought the pommel of his sword down onto the skull of the unarmed skeleton, crunching through the time-worn bone and smashing it asunder. His next blow crashed against the other's shield and Tybalt was forced to sway

backwards as the mace rushed inches in front of his face. With a grunt, Tybalt grabbed the skeleton's shield, pulling the thing's face forward onto the brow of his helm with bone-shattering force. As it flailed backwards under the impact, Tybalt gripped his sword in both hands and cleaved it from right shoulder to pelvis with an arcing, overhead chop.

Tybalt felt something ragged dig deep into his right thigh, and he fell to his left knee, the axe in his leg wrenched from the dead grip of the skeleton. Its fingers clawed at his closed helmet, trying to twist his head off, and Tybalt grabbed its neck in one hand, battering the thing's temples with the quillions of his sword. The skeleton would not let go though, and with a cry of pain, Tybalt forced himself to his feet, his hand still tightly gripping the creature's neck, blood pouring down his leg from where the axe still hung.

'You died once, you can die again!' Tybalt spat, dropping his sword and thrusting the fingers of his free hand into the skeleton's eye sockets. As its clawed fingers scraped deafeningly against his helm, Tybalt stretched his right arm forward with all his strength, pushing the unnatural monster's head further and further back. He felt the thing's bony fingers scratching at his exposed throat and a flicker of fear struck him when they slid across the veins and arteries which were standing out from his neck with the effort of pushing the skeleton away.

Suddenly shifting his weight to one side, Tybalt pulled the skeleton towards him, throwing it over one hip so that it landed back-first on the ground. Its grip had been broken, and Tybalt stamped down on its chest, his heavily armoured boot crushing the unlife from the creature.

Panting with exhaustion and pain, Tybalt grabbed the handle of the axe stuck in his leg and pulled it free, a cry of agony torn from his lips. Tossing the ancient weapon aside, he retrieved his sword from the long grass. Using the blade of his sword, the knight cut a rough bandage from his surcoat and wrapped it around the injured thigh, pulling it painfully tight

over the wound to stem the bleeding. Glancing around to ensure that no more unholy denizens were nearby, he started to limp up the slope towards the necromancer.



THE WIZARD'S face was a picture of almost comical shock when Tybalt staggered through the mist towards him. He had one hand outstretched, the other pointing towards his grimoire, where he had obviously been following the lines of writing. Around him stood a dozen more animated corpses, all of them ancient and yellowing skeletons. The summoner of the dead quickly masked his surprise.

'Still walking, yes?' he said, a cruel smile playing briefly across his thin, cracked lips.

'I am,' Tybalt replied simply, taking another step towards the necromancer, his sword held across his chest.

'It does not matter, I have more minions to deal with you,' the wizard said glibly, gesturing left and right to the skeletons stood around him.

'And I will destroy them in turn, before I destroy you,' Tybalt answered with utmost sincerity, momentarily surprised at his own confidence.

The sorcerer hesitated for a second, and once again Tybalt noticed doubt creeping into the old man's eyes. The knight took another step forward.

'You think you can stop me? On your own?' sneered the necromancer, but Tybalt caught more than just a hint of false bravado about the wizard's defiance.

'One Bretonnian knight is enough for any evil creature, be it griffon, elf-thing, orc, or man,' Tybalt assured the necromancer. A shadow of fear passed briefly across the evil wizard's face. Behind the magic user, two of the skeletons began to sway back and forth

and then collapsed into a pile of bones. Tybalt thought he saw a flicker of soul-light and heard a distant cry of joy of a spirit set free once more. The necromancer turned and looked over his shoulder before his horrified gaze settled on Tybalt once more.

'Your power is fading, old man,' Tybalt said menacingly, pleased with the metallic ring given to his voice by the closed visor of his helmet. He saw the necromancer swallow hard, eyes darting left and right, searching for an escape route. Another three skeletons crumbled into grave dust to the knight's left.

'No, no, no, no...' the foul wizard whispered harshly and then began to babble something in a strange tongue. But this was no otherworldly language of magic, for Tybalt recognised it as the Reikspiel of the Empire, even though he did not understand the words.

'It seems your creations are sparing me the exertion of slaying them again,' Tybalt joked, marching slowly through the long grass. He levelled the point of his sword at the necromancer.

'Your death will be brief,' the knight assured him with all earnestness. With a clatter of bones the magic animating the remaining skeletons was broken, and the necromancer was left standing alone in the thinning fog. Tybalt saw that his foe was visibly shaking with fear now, as the knight stalked across the shallow dell. Once more, the necromancer looked for somewhere to run, but there was no way out. Even wounded, the knight would catch the crippled wizard with ease.

'What powers of magic have you that you can destroy my creations so easily?' asked the wizard, eyes pleading beneath his grey brows.

'I have no magic other than the blessing of the Lady,' Tybalt answered him. 'It is your own weaknesses that have destroyed them, your own lack of will to keep them animated. Your magic is powerful, but you are weak. Without your magic, you are nothing!'

'Have mercy, knight,' the necromancer begged, eyes filling with tears. 'Please do not kill me!'

'Mercy?' Tybalt sneered, stabbing his sword towards the wizard to emphasise his scorn. 'Mercy for the creature who has despoiled and profaned one of the most sacred places of all Bretonnia? Mercy for the beast who would wake the heroes of our past from their eternal sleep to be slaves to his vile purposes? Mercy for a creature that would sweep away the living with his own tide of death? There can be no mercy for such crimes!'

'Please kill me not!' begged the other, falling to his knees in the long, wet grass. 'I cannot bear the thought of death!'

Tybalt paused in his rage-driven advance.

'Scared of death?' the knight asked scornfully. 'Is that all you have in your defence? You have plagued the living and the dead because of your own fear of death? Your fear is the root of your weakness. The very thing that drove you to seek such dark powers has unmanned you.'

'I cannot bear the thought of the final ending of my life,' the necromancer admitted, his squinting eyes streaming with tears of fear and loathing. 'I had to find some way to escape. I did not mean harm. That I will one day not be anymore fills me with terror that I cannot face.'

'But death is not an ending,' Tybalt growled, stepping towards the wizard, through the thick weeds once more. 'As the duke has shown me, death is merely a gateway to another place. If we live well, we shall be rewarded the Lady will take care of us, and we shall be beside her for the rest of time.'

'How do you know of such things?' the sorcerer demanded, his face filled with anguish.

'I do not know such things. I believe in them,' Tybalt answered, standing over the cowering necromancer. 'I have faith that what I have been taught is true. I need no evidence of the land beyond death, for it is faith in its existence that will take me there.'

'And what of those who have no faith?' the necromancer asked fearfully.

'I do not know,' the knight replied, drawing his sword back. 'Perhaps we all

get what we believe in. Perhaps you will just simply cease, or perhaps your soul will be trapped in a limbo between realms. Or maybe even there is a hell, and devils will rend your soul for all eternity.' Tybalt stepped to one side of the necromancer and braced his legs in the soft ground.

'You will know, sooner than I!' he cried, his sword arm bringing his blade swiftly across the necromancer's neck, sending the head tumbling into the overgrown grass.



AS TYBALT rode back along the single road of Moreux, a crowd of peasants began to gather around him. He must have been a fearsome sight, his armour scratched and bloody, his face a grim mask. Reaching the open space that served as town square, he halted his steed.

'Foul things have come to this land because we have allowed them to trespass,' he called to the assembled throng. 'We have forgotten that which should be remembered. Hear this, and heed it well. As a knight of Bretonnia, I command you all to send men to the graveyard along the pass, to clear away the ruin of centuries. It shall be your duty to see that it is maintained with dignity and pride. I lay this honour upon you. Do not fail in this task, for I shall return, and I shall demand to know who is responsible if my commands fall on deaf ears!'

As the peasants began to drift away, Tybalt turned to look back at the hill at the top of the pass. The sun was just now reaching over its crest, its golden light spilling down the slope and lending it a beauty it had not had in the dark mists of the night before. He wondered for a moment if the duke was still there looking down on him.

'Farewell, Milord,' the knight said to himself. 'You have earned your rest.' 🐉

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WITHIN ITS oval frame of enamelled copper, the holo-plate displayed the nearly perfect sphere of a planet fringed with cloud and shining seas. Fleet Captain Karlache slapped a knob, causing the image of the world to rotate at a faster rate.

'The mapping is incomplete, having been carried out from orbit by the first surveyor ship to arrive,' Karlache explained. He struck the knob again, making the image halt and then move around in small jerks until a pear-shaped continent became visible. He positioned an arrow in the middle of it. 'This is where the first landing was made, on the sole inhabited continent. The initial survey had reported a sparse human population which, like many settlements dating from the Dark Age of Technology, had lost the technical arts and degenerated to the Stone Age. As you know, Imperial policy in such circumstances is to land amid the populated area and take control immediately. A single battalion, lightly armed, was deemed more than sufficient to subdue a primitive people, establish a military base, and secure the planet for the Imperium. As you also know by now, it was wiped out almost immediately, without a single survivor.'

The captain looked around at his guests. They were seated in his private cabin – with its darkly gleaming panelled walls embellished with icons of the Emperor, and its ribbed and curved ceiling – aboard the troopship he commanded, the *Mobilitatum*. With a thousand troopers aboard, the *Mobilitatum* was approaching Planet ABL 1034, the planet on the screen, as was its sister ship, the *Straterium*. Some distance to their rear came two immense travel pods containing Warlord Titans, the *Lex et Annihilato* and the *Principio non Tactica*, two prime examples of the mightiest land-war machines ever to exist.

Their commanders, Princes Gaerius and Princes Efferim, sat across the cabin, men of stern appearance in their diamond-shaped peaked caps, skulls stitched onto their epaulets. Also present were Imperial Guard Colonel Costos and Commissar Henderak, both of the Fifth Helvetian Regiment.

It was most unusual for sealed orders to be entrusted to a Fleet captain rather than to an Imperial Guard officer, but security was of the essence. Public morale dictated that as few as possible should know what had happened on Planet ABL 1034. 'A stronger expedition equipped with Leman Russ battle tanks and Basilisk mobile artillery was then despatched to the same location. It met a similar fate. Messages despatched to the orbiting transports spoke of giant beasts which the natives were using as battle weapons. Only one brief visual transmission was received.'

Planet ABL 1034 vanished from the holo-plate. A blurred, shaking picture replaced it, showing a huge shape looming over the camera. Colossus-like legs, a vast neck, jaws that could have swallowed the cabin in which the officers watched – then nothing. The screen went blank.

'Large animals have been trained for use in battle on many primitive planets, including on ancient Terra,' Captain Karlache continued. 'Such forms of warfare have never presented the least problem to the Imperial Guard. The difference here would appear to be one of size. The Imperium has simply not encountered beasts this huge before.'

Again the Fleet captain manipulated the knobs in front of the enamel-decorated holo-plate. A procession of lumbering creatures crossed the visual area, some with long necks and thick tails. The outline of a man in the corner of the screen gave some idea as to their size, which was much larger than any living Terran animal. 'Genetors of the Adeptus Mechanicus, by studying fossil

records, have established that beasts such as these lived on Earth a hundred million years ago. Similar animals are common throughout the galaxy but are too unmanageable to be trained for war. In any case, they could be downed with a single shot. How even larger beasts are able to be utilised on the target planet is a mystery. However, Mechanicus Genitors have named them "archaeosaurs", because of their resemblance to the ancient Earth animals.'

Again the scene on the holo-plate changed to show clouds and filaments formed of stars. An arrow picked out the star that warmed Planet ABL 1034. 'The archaeosaur planet has a strategic value, as you can see for yourselves. It guards the crossing point between no less than three star systems, all of them of interest to the Imperium. It has been ordered that the planet will not be permitted to be lost by default. It must be occupied. That is why two Warlord Titans have been assigned to the next landing, so that there may be no question of further defeat.'

Colonel Costos coughed softly. 'While not wishing to criticise command decisions, is it not an overreaction to call on the Adeptus Titanicus in this case? Our Fifth Helvetian Regiment is battle-hardened, down to less than half its original strength.' He made this last statement with pride. Imperial Guard regiments generally dwindled in proportion to the number of engagements they had fought, their final remnants eventually being absorbed elsewhere. A regiment at full strength meant an inexperienced regiment. 'The second landing was made by elements of the First Ixist, a newly raised regiment that had never seen an engagement before. It is certain the whole affair was carelessly executed, the natives underestimated. It is sometimes a fatal error to suppose that primitive people need not be taken seriously in military terms. I have known men armed with nothing but stone axes to overrun a Guard outpost in a sneak attack.'

Commissar Henderak nodded in judicious agreement. 'Either that, or the First Ixist had not enough faith in the Emperor!'

On hearing this, Princeps Gaerius looked askance at the commissar, disdain flitting across his face. The Adeptus Titanicus was an ancient order, predating the Ministorum which promulgated the Cult of the Emperor, and it was unique among the Imperium's

fighting forces in coming under the Adeptus Mechanicus. Its officers mostly followed the Martian religion, worshipping the Emperor as the Machine-God and Totality of All Knowledge. The icons on the bridge of Gaerius's Titan were quite different from the 'holy' images he saw here. Tek sigils and arcane formulae overlaid the Emperor's stern visage. In his eyes, Imperial Guard commissars, with their emotional ranting about faith, were little short of lunatics.

The look on Gaerius's face did not go unnoticed by Captain Karlache. Surreptitiously he studied the Princeps. He was hook-nosed, a feature common among Titanicus officers – a consequence, no doubt, of the hereditary strain in the Adeptus. Privately, Karlache agreed with Colonel Costos that the mission was a trivial misuse of such extraordinary machines. He wondered if Gaerius and Efferim thought so too. Not that they would ever voice such an opinion. The discipline of Titan officers was legendary.

For the first time, Princeps Gaerius spoke, his voice dry and sardonic. 'There is little to go on, it seems. But no matter. We of the Adeptus, at any rate, have little to fear. Let us get down on-planet and bring this business to a speedy finish.'



LANDING A Titan was not a simple matter. This was the time when the monstrous machines were most at risk. On the bridge of the *Lex et Annihilato*, Princeps Gaerius took the command seat. Beside him were his bridge officers: Tactical Officer Viridens, Weapons Moderati Knifsmith, and Chief Engineer Moriens. Down below, sweating with fear, huddled the Titan's five dozen ordinary crewmen. Command had been temporarily handed to the four-man landing-and-ascent crew of the transport pod, who now were seated before the command podium which in turn was hooked through to the pod's controls.

The conning plate currently showed the view outside the pod. Feet first, the Titan was lowering itself through Planet ABL 1034's atmosphere. In the distance, the pod

carrying the Principio non Tactica with Princeps Efferim and his crew could be seen. Heated air flamed around it, turning the pod white-hot.

The Titans were to be the first to land. The Imperial Guard would arrive under their protection. Using consummate skill to keep the tall pod stable as it fell, the crew steered the Lex et Annihilato towards its designated landing place. Deceleration over, they soared over a landscape of mountains, valleys, and plains interspersed with dense forests. It appeared to be a fertile world, Princeps Gaerius thought. No wonder it had been colonised, long ago in the Dark Age of Technology. Now it would become more than just a strategic outpost. He could see it someday becoming a productive agricultural world, perhaps later even a forge world or a hive world. He leaned close to the conning plate with this thought in mind, imagining how the landscape would look in the future.

'What in the All-Knowing's Name is that?' The exclamation was torn from his throat. 'Steersman, take us back over that ridge!'

The pod officer glanced back at him nervously. 'That will be tricky, Princeps.'

'Take us back, I say!'

Although technically Gaerius was not in command of the Titan at this moment, the pod officer dared not defy him. Instead, he muttered to the men on either side of him. Carefully, consulting continually with one another, they eased the pod back over to the other side of the ridge and hovered. Oaths now came involuntarily from the mouths of all Gaerius's officers.

Five huge hulks lay toppled on their sides in a broad fern-clad valley. They must have lain there for centuries, for they were rusting away, dissolving with age, riddled with holes and covered in lichen.

Had they been standing they would not have been as tall as the Warlord Titans, but they were broader, monstrous rotund shapes. Tactical Officer Viridens gasped out shocked words.

'Ork Gargants!'

It was indeed astonishing to see these mighty machines, the crude ork version of Titans, felled and abandoned on a primitive world. Gaerius looked thoughtfully on the scene. 'It seems the orks have also tried to take this world at some time in the past.'

'And they were defeated?' Weapons Moderati Knifsmith ground out. 'It's hardly credible!'

'Hardly defeated by the natives,' Gaerius told him confidently. 'Orks usually end up fighting among themselves. In any case, we have nothing to fear. Whenever a Titan has met a Gargant, the Titan has prevailed.'

Gargants were best described as caricatures of Titans. In place of power bundles, they were worked by clumsy, clanking beams and cogwheels. And they were steam-driven! In place of fission reactors, banks of furnaces were fed by teams of stokers!

But then, no one could build such superb machines as those of the Adeptus Titanicus. They were all thousands of years old, and even though continually repaired and renewed, they still retained the special occult qualities of the Dark Age of Technology. The Adeptus Mechanicus had tried to build brand-new Titans themselves, but the fruits of their efforts never performed nearly as well.

'Enough!' Gaerius said shortly. 'On, pilot.'

The great pod eased itself back over the ridge. Far in the distance, Gaerius saw what looked like a herd of animals, but there was no time now to magnify the image. The slow thunder of the landing engine faded as the pod was lowered gently onto a plain scattered about with overturned artillery, smashed tanks, and flattened drop shuttles. This was where the second expedition had met its grisly fate, and this was where the Imperium would now, finally, exert its will.

Planet ABL 1034 was a low-gravity planet, perfect for the operation of Titans, which originally had been designed for use on Mars. The huge pod opened up and trundled away over the moss. The Lex et Annihilato was revealed in all its prodigious glory, roughly the shape of a man and the height of a 12-storey building, bristling with armament. Half a mile away stood its match, the Principio non Tactica.

Princeps Gaerius smiled. Whenever he saw two Titans standing on the same landscape, twinned colossi, he felt an urge to engage in a duel, to have the machines striding towards one another with shoulder cannon blazing. He was sure that his colleague Princeps Efferim, on the bridge situated within the cranium of the Principio non Tactica, felt the same. It had never been

his luck to engage with a Chaos Titan, possibly the only worthy opponent of the Adeptus. But one day...

The landing crew left the bridge. Chief Engineer Moriens left too, descending into the body of the Warlord to rally the cowering crewmen. Now the drop shuttles were coming in, Imperial Guard detachments piling out and setting up a perimeter around the watchful Titans. More shuttles landed and disgorged Basilisk artillery, Leman Russ tanks, and Rhino armoured carriers.

For the third time, Planet ABL 1034 was claimed for the Imperium. For a while, the landing force would merely hold its ground, scanning the terrain from within the craniums of the Warlords, waiting to see if an attack would come. If it did not, the Titans would stride out to seek the Emperor's revenge.



GUARDSMAN Leche and Colour Sergeant Hangist were the last two left in the prisoner cage. In his tattered uniform, Osmin Leche – smeared with mud and pale of face – stared from between the rough-hewn timbers at the stone-age village which sprawled all round him.

He had always thought of stone-age humans as shambling and brutish, a picture reinforced by the pre-landing morale lectures. But the people he saw striding among the fern-thatched huts were nothing like that. They were tall, muscled men, proud of bearing. They were gracious, equally proud women. They were agile, healthy children. It was he, Osmin Leche, who felt like a frightened primitive. By contrast, the natives, who should have cowered in fear and awe at contact with the Imperium, had shown no fear at all.

And no wonder. Far off, the guardsman could see one of the natives' battle beasts ambling across the horizon. It was like watching a mountain move, a mountain with a long neck carrying a huge head like a rock outcrop, and an impossibly long and massive tail. From where Leche cowered, the human beings which he knew swarmed over the beast were too small to be visible.

He shuddered, remembering the attack which had killed most of his comrades.

Colour Sergeant Hangist squatted in a corner of the cage, his head in his hands. One thing was true about the stone age primitives, and that was their cruelty. There had been 50 captives in the cage to begin with. The villagers had been killing one per day, always by some different method. Their ingenuity seemed inexhaustible.

While the commissar had been alive, Leche had been able to keep his own spirits up to some extent. The commissar had exhorted them constantly to keep faith in the Emperor, and he had encouraged them to believe that rescue was possible. The villagers had seemed to be amused by his hectoring, though of course they could not understand it. They had kept him till nearly last. He had been killed the day before.

True, it had been inspiring to witness the commissar's grim fortitude as he was torn apart, limb by limb. Only at the very end did his torturers succeed in wringing cries of agony from him. But the spectacle had finally broken Colour Sergeant Hangist. And it had broken Guardsman Leche too.

Leche shivered. He trembled. The Imperium was far away. The Emperor was but a word.

He glanced again at the distant archaeosaur, to use the name given the beasts in the morale lectures. It had turned and was approaching the village.

Then a creaking sound from behind made him turn. The cage's gate was opening. Bronze-skinned stone-age men entered. They dragged out the whimpering, sobbing Emperor's Guardsmen to face their doom.



THERE WAS A peculiarity to Planet ABL 1034. Cloud formations were all of the same type, a series of evenly spaced ribs or striations high in the sky, stretching from horizon to horizon. No one in the expeditionary force asked himself what produced this phenomenon. That was a task for an adept, and to the military mind, planetary peculiarities were too numerous to be worth thinking about. But as the

striped cloud cover raced across the sky, it broke up the light of the hard, white sun and produced a rippling effect on the ground below.

Princes Gaerius found the rapidly shifting light and shade eerie but also restful. The expedition had not so far been challenged, and the officers were enjoying a meal in the open air. Artillery and tracked vehicles grumbled and clanked around them.

It was a traditional courtesy for a Princeps to eat with Imperial Guard officers during a combined operation, though both Gaerius and Efferim would much have preferred to be with the rest of their bridge crews, supervising a meticulous checking of their Warlords. Commissar Henderak was consulting the Imperial Tarot. Reverently he unfolded the purple velvet cloth in which the deck was wrapped, pushed aside the remains of the meal and laid out three cards to form a triangle, tapping each in turn.

The surfaces of the cards glittered and swirled, flashing with colour. The card at the apex of the triangle was the Significator. It was the first to clear and form an image. The Emperor appeared, seated on a throne carved from a single gigantic diamond, glaring out at the beholder.

The card on the left was the next to stabilise. It showed Universal Force, a snake with its tail in its mouth, whirling endlessly against a background of receding galaxies. The final card cleared almost immediately after it to show The Galactic Realm, producing one of several images by which that card manifested itself. A maiden in a flowing gown stood on a landscape, star formations in the sky at her back, pouring multicoloured liquid from two large pitchers she held, one in each hand. The liquid flooded the landscape, carrying away cities and forests.

The commissar banged his fist on the table. 'The meaning is clear!' he intoned. 'Might will prevail!'

'Of course,' Princeps Efferim drawled, glancing casually at the triangle of images. 'What else could the cards show if they tell the truth?'

'Yes, what else?' Commissar Henderak said feverishly. 'Though the message contains an ambiguity. One must judge carefully, when interpreting the Emperor's Tarot. True, the presence of The Emperor as Significator confirms that the message

relates to our current operation. But Universal Force does not necessarily refer to the forces of the Divine Emperor. Forces opposed to His Terribilitas could be implied. Also, the Galactic Realm...'

The commissar's eyes widened as he redirected his gaze back to the final card. The image was changing, the landscape writhing and rising up around the feet of the maiden, threatening to topple her.

'Imperator Divinitas!' he gasped in horror. 'We are undone!'

Gaerius's patience had reached its limit. With a grunt of disgust, he swept the cards from the table. 'Enough of your superstition, faith cultist,' he snarled. 'True holiness is the holiness of the machine. Suggest defeat for our Titans on a planet of animals, and you are ripe for reprocessing as a servitor!'

Commissar Henderak leapt to his feet, fury on his face. It was not that he heard the Princeps's words as an insult to himself personally. He heard them as an insult to the Emperor. He made a sudden movement, as if reaching for his laspistol.

Colonel Costos was about to intervene, but excited shouting from the perimeter interrupted the exchange. A veteran sergeant ran up and saluted hastily.

'Native war-beasts advancing on the camp, colonel!'

Princeps Gaerius laughed, sounding like a drain emptying. 'Now you will see!'



'B RING THE two slaves forward!' The order was barked out by the clan hetman. He stood in the middle of the village compound, wavy blond hair flowing down his hard-muscled back, a stone axe thrust into his belt of woven fern leaves. Colour Sergeant Hangist and Guardsman Leche were flung at his feet, where they cringed like dogs, peering left and right.

'These are not warriors!' the hetman roared at the villagers who were gathered round him. 'These are slaves of the Giant Shining Men, the real warriors who have come again from the sky to do battle with us. That is why the gods gave us the Defenders: to help us fight the Giant Shining Warriors!'

Leche and Hangist could not, of course, understand a syllable of what the hetman was saying. All they understood by this time was that every second they remained alive and untortured was a miracle. At the same time, the knowledge that pain and death were coming closer second by second struck stark fear into their souls. Leche gibbered as he was once more wrenched to his feet. Hangist groaned with despair.

And then they saw them again. There were two of them, coming closer, pacing the plain one after the other, looming against the sky: archaeosaurs. They were like mottled grey and brown mountains with massive, reptilian heads on the end of long, sinuous necks, the weight balanced by enormous rippling tails as long as the bodies themselves.

This was the second time they had seen such monsters. The first time was when the beasts had destroyed the Imperial Guard camp. Leman Russ tanks had been unable to stop them. Basilisk artillery had been unable to stop them. They had trampled everything, moving surprisingly quickly on their eight sturdy legs, four on a side, thicker than any tree trunk. Guardsman Leche found it incredible, almost unimaginable, that there could be animals as huge as these.

Either one of the beasts could have trampled the village to dust by merely strolling through it, but instead they halted far outside its bounds, heads swaying. Despite their size, they looked placid enough for the moment. Leche knew that really massive animals would have to be plant-eaters, and there was no grass on this planet, only ferns and moss – endless fern forests and fern-covered plains. He could imagine the wide swathes the beasts would cut through such forests as they fed.

With whoops and shouts, the villagers dragged Leche and Hangist out of the village. Being sacrificed to the monsters would at least be quicker than the deaths suffered by many of his comrades, Leche thought. They came nearer, and now men could be seen crawling over the vast bodies as if on hillsides. The guardsman could also see house-like structures erected on their backs, and – what seemed most weird – one such structure atop each massive head.

The steadily flickering daylight of Planet ABL 1034 gave the scene an unreal, disjointed appearance. Now Guardsman

Leche could see how the tribesmen climbed onto the huge beasts. Rope ladders hung down from their sides and trailed over the ground. Leche found himself at the foot of one. A tribesman mounted a rung, seized hold of Leche by one arm, and jerked him upward. Haplessly the young man was hauled up the ladder, soon forced to assist in the climb or fall a lethal distance to the ground below.

Leche saw Colour Sergeant Hangist being dragged towards the second archaeosaur. Once the guardsman passed the point where the ropes fell away from the beast's hide, he saw how easy it was to move about on top of the archaeosaur. The immensely thick and tough hide was corrugated. On the lower slopes of the animal-mountain, one could walk in these corrugations as though in a trough or trench. Scrambling over these, he and his captors came close to the gigantic spine, where the corrugations smoothed out somewhat and it was like making one's way on the top of a heaving hill.

Leche now realised that the beast's hide was in fact armoured. Up here it was like stepping on steel or adamantium. Tribesmen dotted the vast back. The hetman had made his way here already. He bellowed and gestured. Leche was propelled forward, towards the beast's head. Even facing certain death, Leche found time for a touch of pure curiosity about what was to happen. Certainly this was an unusual way to die, an adventure he would have enjoyed telling to his comrades of the First Ixist – if there had been any way he could have survived it.

The archaeosaur's neck, though long, was not all that lengthy as compared with the huge body. It had, after all, only to reach ground level in order to feed, so it was little longer than the eight comparatively stubby legs. Traversing it was like walking up a mountain trail. And there, set on top of the giant reptilian head, was a square hut or covered platform. It was open at the front and back, and three tribesmen squatted in it. Leche got an odd feeling. It was like looking at a primitive version of the bridge of some fearsome war machine!

Leche was pushed through the hut and out the other side. In passing, he saw what at first he took to be a dozen bony spines projecting from the top of the archaeosaur's skull, but then he realised that they were rudely shaped stone spikes hammered into

the animal's head! Before he could wonder what these were for his fate was revealed to him. Forward of the hut, also mounted on the beast's head, not far behind the eyes, stood a timber X-shape. Guardsman Leche's captors fastened him to this, limbs spread, and left him there.

Leche could hear the beast's stertorous breathing. It sounded like nothing so much as the engine of a Leman Russ tank. Turning his head, he was soon able to see Colour Sergeant Hangist spread-eagled on an identical X-beam above the eyes of the second war-beast.

So here Guardsman Leche was: a mascot, an emblem, a figurehead, and perhaps a taunt to the enemy. The archaeosaurs were going into battle. Against another tribe? Or a third Imperial Guard expedition?

From behind him came banging, clinking noises. The Imperial Guard officers who had faced these war-beasts had been at a loss to know how the primitive tribesmen controlled them. Here was the answer, though Leche could not look around far enough to see it. The stone-age people had lived on Planet ABL 1034 for a long time, and they had learned much. The stone spikes had been driven through the archaeosaur's skull to precise points within the tiny brain. By banging the spikes with his stone hammer and making them vibrate, the mahout could stimulate nerve centres at will. One spike and the creature would advance. Another spike and it would retreat. Others, and it would turn left, turn right, fly into a rage, and attack. Another, and it would spew fire!

The hetman barked an order. The squatting mahout banged one spike, then another. The two archaeosaurs lumbered off, away from the village.

Towards the Giant Shining Warriors.



'HERE THEY come,' said Princeps Gaerius. 'Ready to move out!' The bridge crewmen of the Lex et Annihilato took up their positions, pulling down the control sets to link with the metal sockets set into their skulls.

As commander, only Gaerius himself was free of such an interface. Chief Engineer Moriens was most encumbered. His head almost disappeared amid a nest of pipes, tubes and leads. It was his responsibility to keep contact with the whole internal machinery of the Warlord, to supervise its running crew, and to keep everything functioning whatever the damage. Tactical Officer Viridens would actually guide the giant battle machine, moving it like his own body at Gaerius's orders, with a direct neural connection to the power bundles.

The Chief Engineer was also effectively blind, seeing nothing outside. Gaerius, Moriens and Weapons Moderati Knifsmith had access to the conning holos. Gaerius looked to the right, where the companion Warlord Principio non Tactica stood, also gearing itself up to move.

The Lex et Annihilato roared. Warlord Titans had the imprinted mental nature of the grizzly bear, a powerful bad-tempered animal native to Terra, and this sometimes made them difficult to handle. The Principio non Tactica also roared. At a word from Gaerius, they each took a gigantic step forward, carefully treading in the spaces cleared for them. A few steps more, and they were outside the camp and striding towards the horizon.

'There are only two of them,' Gaerius murmured. 'I had expected more.'

At first it was difficult to estimate the size of the archaeosaurs as they loped onward. It was the speed of their approach, perhaps, that made them seem not as large as they really were. Moving with a shuffling motion on their eight sturdy legs, they appeared to Gaerius's eye scarcely larger than Terran dinosaurs. He relaxed. This should take no more than moments, after which the natives were unlikely to have any stomach for further action.

Gaerius, as Acting Group Commander, outranked Efferim for the duration of the engagement. He spoke briefly into his communicator, issuing orders to his fellow Princeps. Fibre bundles humming like swarms of angry hornets, leg shanks clanging, the twin Titans strode out towards their primitive challengers.

And then Gaerius caught his breath in surprise. The brief blurred transmission from the destroyed second expedition had not prepared him for what he now saw. The

archaeosaurs were enormous – bigger than he would have believed remotely possible for any land animal, even taking the low gravity into account. The monster's head, when raised, reared even higher than the Warlord's!

That was not the only comparison between the two. Behind the Titans, using them for protection like mice scurrying behind a man, came the Imperial Guard force: tanks, mobile artillery, and infantry. It was the same on the other side. A ragged column of at least a thousand nearly naked primitives, armed with spears and stone axes, trailed behind the archaeosaur, ready to take on whatever their battle-beasts left alive.

How did the creatures stand up? Their bones must be made of steel, he thought with incredulity – or adamantium. Still, they could not conceivably withstand the Titans' armament. He barked orders again. The Warlords angled out to approach the archaeosaurs from their flanks and get an easier target, then their huge legs pumped faster, propelling them almost at a run.

By now, Tactical Officer and Weapons Moderati had almost become a single personality, joined by the grizzly-bear-essence imprinted on the *Lex et Annihilato*. The shoulder cannon swivelled, aimed at the flank of one of the impossibly huge beasts, and opened up. A shattering noise echoed through the cranium of the Titan as a volley of shells went hurtling towards the defenceless target.

Disbelievingly, Princeps Gaerius watched as the entire volley bounced off the beast's armoured back. Some exploded in mid-air; others flew away and fell to the ground. The archaeosaur, however, seemed unhurt by the explosions. It lumbered around to face the Titan with its smouldering, yellow eyes. Now Gaerius saw that what he had taken to be a fringe or crest on the creature's skull was actually an artificial structure in the form of a covered platform, and within it squatted men. Did these men manage to control the animal? If so, how?

But there was something else. Set in front of the platform an X-beam had been erected. To this – uniform torn and ragged, face covered in dirt – was bound a guardsman.

Up to now, Gaerius's feelings for the enemy – whom he had scarcely considered an enemy, so inferior were they – had been neutral. Now his heart filled with hatred.

'Poor wretch,' he muttered to himself. There was no way he could help the prisoner, who was sure to die along with the archaeosaur. He put him from his mind.

He doubted that Weapon Moderati Knifsmith's aim was good enough to hit the swaying head. 'Aim lower!' he ordered. 'The belly will have less armour!'

Again the shoulder cannon roared their ferocious violence. This time, several shells struck home, creating a brief smoke screen. When it cleared, Gaerius expected to see the smashed carcass of the archaeosaur lying on its side, twitching. He gaped with renewed astonishment to see the monster still standing. True, some of the shells had penetrated the hide and left deep gaping wounds. Yet the archaeosaur was unshaken. It was as if it did not even feel the torn flesh and flowing blood.

And it was still on the move, turning to face the Titan. Gaerius was about to order another volley, but first he glanced towards the *Principio non Tactica* and momentarily froze. The second archaeosaur, also dripping blood from a cannon volley, was charging towards the Warlord at a run. Suddenly its jaws gaped open, and from between its rows of teeth came a white-hot gout of fire which enveloped the upper part of the *Principio*.

To the astounded Princeps, it looked just like a plasma weapon – something with which he had not thought to equip the Warlords. Who would have thought to need it on a world like this? He did not know of the archaeosaurs' prodigious digestive system with its twenty-three stomachs, building up acetylene gas at high pressure, or of the unusual metabolism which mixed pure phosphorus into that acetylene. When the archaeosaur belched, which it did when angry or when made to do so by a bang on the appropriate stone spike, the acetylene was squirted out and ignited by the phosphorus on contact with the air. Evolution had devised the phenomenon as a defence against predators. It was even more effective as a weapon.

The *Principio*'s bridge must have been completely blinded during the discharge, though the void shields would have protected the crew from the heat. But there was a second tactic to the archaeosaur's attack. It reared up on its four hind legs. It now towered over the Warlord. When

Principes Efferim's view cleared, he saw the vast beast come crashing down on his land-war machine in an attempt to topple it.

'Assist Principio!' Gaerius shouted. 'All weapons!'

The Lex et Annihilato swivelled. Moderati Knifsmith let loose with both shoulder cannon and the belly lasgun. The Principio staggered back, its own belly lasgun also opening up, trying desperately to keep its footing against the monstrous weight of the angry beast. It probably would have succeeded, but the archaeosaur had yet another trick. It turned aside. The vast tail came swinging round and crashed into the body of the Titan, where the power source and main engines were located. The carapace buckled.

Now a red steam obscured the view as Principio's two heavy lasguns bit into the beast and vaporised huge amounts of its blood. Through Gaerius's communicator came a faint voice – that of Efferim's Chief Engineer

'Void shields down.'

Then, with utter horror, Princeps Gaerius saw the Principio non Tactica fall, first losing its balance, unable to correct the momentum imparted by the archaeosaur's tail, then one foot lifting off the ground, then the huge structure descending with slow majesty in the low gravity, until it smashed into the hard earth.

Once a Titan was toppled, there was virtually no chance of its getting to its feet again. Princeps Gaerius shrieked orders, turning his attention back to the archaeosaur threatening the Annihilato.

'The head! Aim for the head!'

Alert to the fate that had overtaken the sister Titan, Viridens backed away, jinking aside to prevent the creature mounting a similar assault, even though it was clear by now that the archaeosaurs were more agile than their bulk gave them any right to be. Shoulder cannon barked, and both missed the waving head as it turned on its sinuous neck to follow the Warlord. Gaerius was dimly aware of the other archaeosaur trampling the fallen Principio non Tactica, rending and splitting the defenceless carapace. Briefly the lasgun hissed out again, but it was unable to target the beast.

Then Gaerius glimpsed a final indignity. Men were spilling out of the cracks in the casing like maggots from a festering body.

And he could see what they were fleeing from: a blinding-white, ravening glow in the interior. The Warlord's fission reactor was in meltdown, its fuel elements fused together by the force of the archaeosaur's trampling.

Now Gaerius knew what had happened to the Gargants. And now, its business finished, the second archaeosaur was coming to join its brother. It was frightening how the mountain of an animal was still able to move with great chunks torn out of it by four repeat shoulder cannon and two heavy lasguns. It seemed the monsters were unstoppable. The bones of the beast were even exposed, a lustrous grey in colour. Gaerius could well believe they were made of iron or even steel.

'Aim right, Moderati! Aim right! Look out for the tail!'

The warning came too late. The tail lashed out swifter than the eye could follow and struck the Titan on one knee. The Warlord juddered. A muffled battle report came from Chief Engineer Moriens.

'Left leg disabled.'

Despite himself terror struck into Princeps Gaerius's soul. His Titan had lost mobility. And two archaeosaurs were bent on toppling and trampling it.

'The brain!' he insisted. 'You must go for the brain!'

Weapons Moderati Knifsmith did not need urging. He was still trying to target the head on which Guardsman Leche was strapped like a sacrificial victim. It was easier as the beast came closer. With a feeling of desperation he watched shell after shell bounce off the giant skull. Was there any brain in it? Was it pure metal-laden bone through and through?

Tactical Officer Viridens shifted the Warlord's good leg, attempting as best he could to brace the Titan against the strain that was to come. Both archaeosaurs spewed streams of burning phosphorus-acetylene, temporarily blinding the bridge crew. When the white-hot fumes cleared they faced the dreadful sight of two battle-beasts rearing on their hind legs, blotting out the sky.

Moderati Knifsmith realised that everything now depended on him, and that it would all be over in the next few seconds. In an act of intense concentration, he divided his firepower. He aimed one shoulder cannon up at the lower jaw of the

first archaeosaur. At the same time, he levelled the belly lasgun and the other shoulder cannon together at the same target: one of the deep wounds in the second, grievously injured animal.

The hiss and racket of the weapons was brief. A single shell passed through the archaeosaur's jaw and entered the skull to explode within it and blast it to pieces. Meantime cannon shells and laser beam ate their way jointly deep into the innards of the other beast, inflicting explosion after explosion at the centre of the massive body. The enormous spine shattered. Both beasts fell, one soundlessly, one with mangled roars, to lie writhing in its death throes.

Luckily neither had fallen against the Warlord. Princeps Gaerius breathed a sigh.

'Well done, Knifsmith!' He turned to the Chief Engineer. 'Moriens, effect repairs immediately.'

Muffled by the mask-like neural interface, Moriens replied.

'Yes, Princeps.'

Imperial Guard units were already attacking the fleeing tribesmen, causing terrible carnage. Guardsman Osmin Leche, having fainted with terror, had died without feeling anything. And no one had heard the death-scream of Colour Sergeant Hangist as he was carried falling to the ground.



THE FIRES IN the village burned low that night. Women keened for their lost men, children cried for their fathers and brothers. The new hetman spoke gravely.

'We have acted with honour,' he said. 'We sent only two Defenders to fight two Giant Shining Warriors. Now here is only one other course of action. We must use the whole herd.'

'But that is dishonour!' protested a young warrior, one of the few to survive.

'When we fight another tribe, then there is honour,' the hetman pronounced. 'Beast is pitted against beast. The vanquished grants the victor tribute of grazing, tools and women, and offers battle the following year. Here there is no honour. The Giant Shining

Warriors from the sky have come to take our world. They must know they cannot.'

The men pondered his words, and could find no fault with them.



THE FLICKERING dawn had come, and repairs to the Lex et Annihilato were complete, when the herd came loping over the horizon. Princeps Gaerius stared aghast. He had assumed from yesterday's battle that the archaeosaurs were rare. Yet here were a hundred animals at least. And they were running straight for the Imperial Guard camp.

He looked stony-faced at Knifsmith, Viridens and Moriens. Stricken, they glared back at him.

Using the conning magnifier, he saw that the onrushing animals were bare of artificial structures. They were not under anyone's direct control – except for four or five 'managed' beasts at the back, and these were driving the others on. The herd was being stampeded.

There was nothing for it but to go down fighting. No officer trained by the Collegio Titanicus would do anything else. Gaerius clenched his fists. 'Battle stations!'

His order went unquestioned. All three bridge officers pulled down their interfaces. Klaxons sounded in the body of the Titan. The ground was shaking. An enormous pounding, as though the planet was breaking up, could be heard even here in the bridge.

The Warlord strode out to its doom, lasgun zipping, shoulder cannon roaring until all magazines were empty. Not a single archaeosaur was downed, but the lasgun, powered by the fission reactor, kept firing until it was destroyed. When the Warlord was caught in the onrush, the press of the creature's steely flesh was so hard that it could not even fall but was instead ground between numerous immense bodies. By the time the herd had passed, the Lex et Annihilato was smashed to fragments. Only the cranium was still intact.

TWENTY LIGHT years distant, the destruction of the third expedition to Planet ABL 1034 was evaluated almost immediately. A visual account of the initial battle, in which one Titan was destroyed, had been retrieved. In the final hour, Colonel Costos of the Fifth Helvetian, showing great bravery, had managed to send a shaky record of the final dreadful events.

The commission was broad-ranging. Imperial Guard Tactical Staff officers accompanied by the obligatory commissar, Collegio Titanicus staff officers, and a priest of the Adeptus Terra, sat round a varnished teak table. They had watched the visual records, including the bridge logs from the *Lex et Annihilato* and the *Principio non Tactica*. All had been shocked to see what a people who did not even know how to smelt metal could do.

'The planet cannot be abandoned,' the Adeptus Terra dignitary pronounced. 'It must be occupied, even if only to deny it to others. What are the options?'

The Collegio Titanicus officer spoke sadly. 'We should not send more of our Titans against those monsters. We cannot afford such losses.'

The commissar, present as a representative of the Ministorum, stirred. 'The Cult of the Emperor has succeeded in worse places. We can take the long approach. Infiltrate trained missionaries into the local culture. Given time, they will create a religion favourable to the Imperium. We can then move in and take over a friendly population.'

'No! We cannot risk it!'

The cry had come from the Collegio Titanicus officer. His face was pained. 'Don't you see? The archaeosaurs are a direct danger to us! Our Dark Age Titans constantly decrease in number, even though slowly. None that are vanquished can be replaced. But these archaeosaurs are animals! They breed! If they get loose into the galaxy, they can be bred without limit! What if the orks get hold of them?'

It must have been hard for a senior officer of the Adeptus Titanicus to speak so. His voice was anguished. 'With respect, the commissar's plan will take too long to execute. Meantime, there is always the risk of an alien race – such as the orks – stepping in, learning from the natives, and

eventually deploying these beasts against us!'

'We could do the same,' the commissar pointed out smoothly.

The suggestion that archaeosaurs might supplant the Adeptus Titanicus plainly horrified the Collegio officer. He shook his head vigorously. 'It is far too dangerous. There is only one real option. Exterminatus!'

'That will deny us the use of the planet, too, for centuries to come,' the commissar said. 'I advocate the gentler course.'

They pondered. And then a shivering stillness seemed to come upon them. It was as though a ghostly presence had passed through the assembly. Several of those present looked up, softly murmuring the same word.

'Exterminatus.'



TIGHTLY BOUND to an X-beam far above the ground, on the swaying head of a giant beast, Princeps Gaerius raged with shame and frustration. Colonel Costos had been right. Primitive peoples were not stupid. They were bright. How, by the Emperor, had they ever learned to bend the archaeosaurs to their will? Could the Adeptus Mechanicus have done any better? Could it have done as well?

Gaerius was forced to admit the natives' cleverness and courage. But they had destroyed his beloved *Annihilato*! They had humiliated the Adeptus Titanicus! For that, only hatred!

A quarter of a mile to his right, Weapons Moderati Knifsmith swayed atop a second battle beast. Tactical Officer Viridens was on a third beast to his left. Chief Engineer Moriens was luckier. He had not survived the final fall of the *Lex et Annihilato*'s cranium.

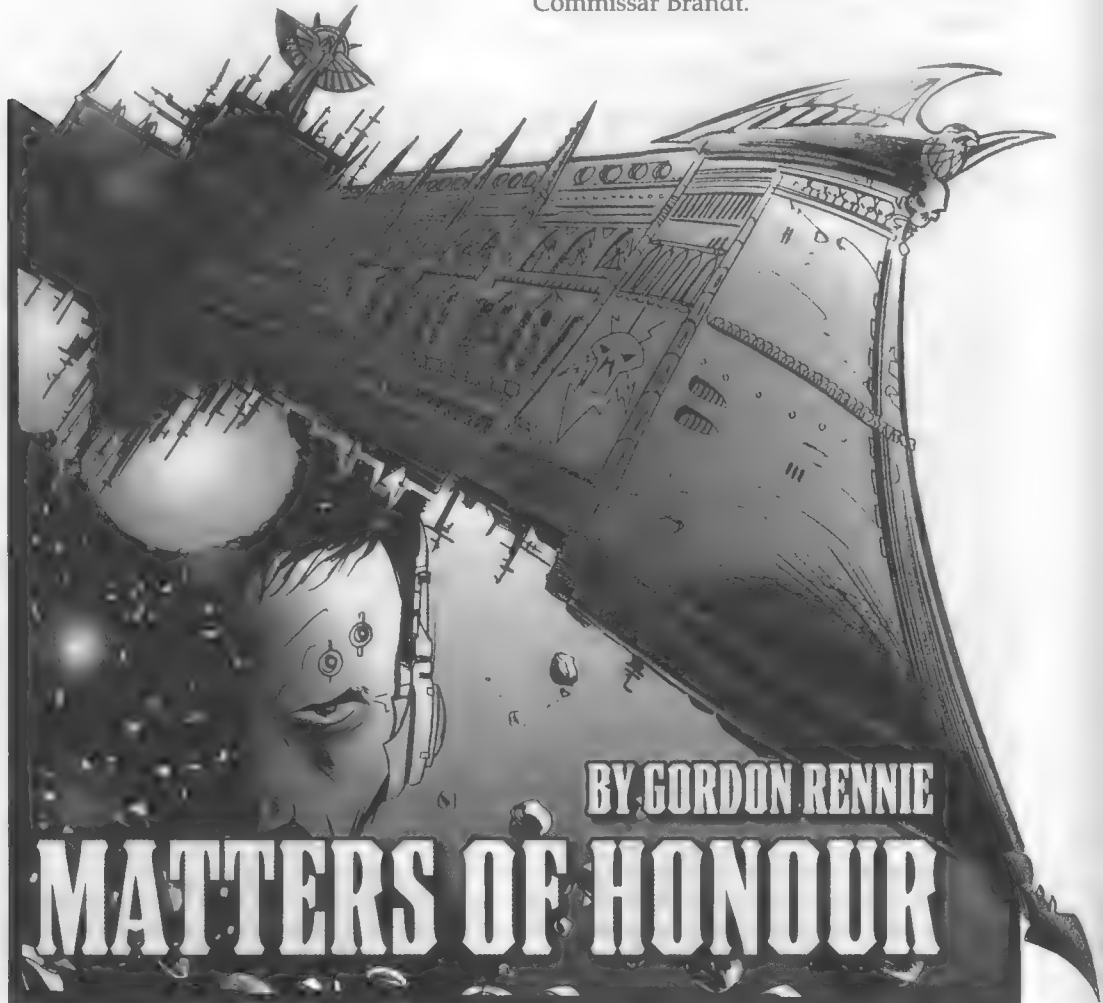
Gaerius raised his face to the sky and cried out with all his soul, as though he could cast his cry through the warp. 'Exterminatus!' he pleaded. 'Exterminatus!' ●

ALL OVER the ship, the clamour of combat was dying away. The sounds of gunshots and the clash of steel on steel were now being replaced by cheers and screams. Cheers, as the victors hunted the last few enemy survivors through the labyrinth of the ship's decks and passageways; screams, as they found each of them in turn.

Flag-Lieutenant Pava Magell walked the length of the main chancel leading to the ship's arsenal, accepting the salutes of the weary but victorious fighters and stopping to offer praise and words of comfort to the injured and dying. It was here that their enemies had made their final stand, barricading themselves inside the main arsenal hold and attempting to detonate the munitions stored there in a last desperate act of defiance – and it had been

Magell himself who had led the assault to clear out this last pocket of resistance and prevent the enemy destroying the entire ship.

A new wave of cheering, louder than any of the others he could hear, rang out from along the broad passage. Magell saw an excited scrum of his men running towards him. They were tossing something ragged and bloody up into the air and catching it on the ends of their cutlasses and bayonets. Magell watched as something smaller but just as bloody was kicked along the deck towards him. It landed at his feet with a sick wet sound. He looked down in curiosity. It was lumpen and misshapen – kicked to a bloody pulp by the heavy work boots of the gunnery crew gangs – and with one eye gone, but Magell still recognised it as the head of Ship's Commissar Brandt.



'Sir?'

Magell turned. Acting Officer of the Watch Kelto was standing to attention before him. Kelto was young and inexperienced for such a veteran position, but Magell judged that the ambitious young officer had earned the post when he executed the previous holder of the rank during their initial violent take-over of the command deck. Kelto's uniform was torn and bloodstained from the fighting, but Magell noticed with approval that this keen youngblood had already ripped off the silver Imperium eagle crest and epaulettes from his stained tunic.

'All decks report victory, sir,' grinned the young officer. 'There'll still be a few stragglers hiding out in the remotest sections or even in our own ranks, but we'll find them all soon enough. Abaddon be praised, captain, the ship is ours.'



THE CLASH OF steel on steel rang through the metal cavern of the flight deck. The deck, the largest open space aboard the Macharius, would normally be full of noise and activity: the scream of revving engines; the shouts of officers barking out orders to sweating ground crew; the rumble of missile-laden loading bay elevators arriving from the arsenal section deep within the ship's hull; the chanting of choirs of tech-priests as they blessed the rows of attack craft suspended in their launch cradles before the start of a combat mission. But today all normal activity on the flight deck had been brought to a halt. Flight officers and ground crew mingled together around the space cleared amongst the deck's maintenance bays. Of the hundreds of crewmen crowded around or watching from the gantry walkways above, only the machine-like servitor drones had not paused from their pre-programmed duties to watch the spectacle now taking place in the centre of the deck.

Lieutenant Hito Ulantı danced back out of reach of his opponent's blade, mindful of the patches of spilled fuel and lube-fluid

that covered the floor of the flight deck. Back home in the towering cities of Necromunda, duelling had been elevated to almost an art form amongst the ruling clans of the Upper Hives, a worthy pastime for every ambitious young blade keen to prove himself in the harsh and unforgiving world of Spire politics, where assassination and violent inter-clan rivalry were as much a part of life as the suffocating layers of aristocratic ritual and etiquette. But in the Imperial Navy things were different. Here, when one faced an opponent in close combat, it was not in the rarefied atmosphere of the duelling chamber, where well-executed moves and flourishes were greeted by a polite chorus of appreciative hisses from the assembled onlookers. In the Navy, close combat came as the result of vicious and bloodily-fought boarding actions, hundreds of participants slaughtering each other within the close confines of a ship's passageways and holds, fighting with whatever weapon or heavy tool came to hand.

Ulantı hefted the sabre in his hand, its blade cutting the air in a series of precisely practised parry moves which caused his opponent to pull back from his intended counterattack. Heavier than the Necromundan duelling foil he was used to, Ulantı's sabre was a concession to the different combat style demanded by the facts of space warfare. Hand-crafted to his own specifications, it was a weapon fit for both a Necromundan aristocrat and an officer in His Divine Majesty's Navy, and this was the first time that Ulantı had used it in combat. A weapon's first bleeding was an important ritual for any warrior and the fact that it was to be conducted here at the expense of the blood of a fellow officer rather than an enemy of the Emperor was not a problem that much troubled the young nobleman.

'Hive-trash! Convict press-gang fodder!' sneered his opponent, prowling around the edge of the other side of the circle. 'Why don't you come over here, within reach of my blade and I'll give you a much-needed lesson in how a real Fleet Officer fights!'

Ulantı feinted forward, the expression of exaggerated anger on his face not matching the coolly calculated manner in which he

made his attack. Spotting a pool of spilled lube-fluid on the deck in front of him, he pretended to slip, stumbling awkwardly into the path of his opponent, who quickly took the bait, moving forward to finish the duel. Ulanti closed the trap, easily side-stepping his opponent's lunge, and bringing his own blade up to bear, its point punching through the heavy material of his opponent's flight suit and through into his body. Ulanti slipped the blade with practised ease through the ribcage and into his opponent's heart. He stepped back, withdrawing the blade contemptuously and allowing his opponent's body to slump to the ground, its blood pooling out to mix with the other fluids staining the floor of the flight deck.

Ulanti turned, raising his bloody sabre in salute to the stolid figure of Broton Styre, the ship's Officer of the Watch, acting here as the captain's representative supervising the proper conduct of the duel. Styre mutely nodded his assent and Ulanti turned and walked away, followed by the young junior officer whom he had selected as his second. The only sound in the entire flight bay was that of the two officers' jackboot heels echoing loudly on the metal decking, and Ulanti could feel the simmering resentment of the hundreds of crewmen around him as they stared silently at the retreating figure of the slayer of one of their own.

Behind him, two servitors acting on a tech-priest's gestured command paced forward to remove the dead squadron commander's body, their lobotomised machine-minds uncaring of the details of the human drama that had just taken place.



‘YOU DISAPPROVE of my duel with Squadron Commander Luccian, captain?’

‘I disapprove of the loss of an able and experienced Starhawk squadron leader, lieutenant. I expect the killing of the Emperor's loyal servants to be the task of our enemies, not my own second-in-command.’

Ulanti was standing to attention before the seated figure of his captain, Leoten Semper. It was dark in the captain's private quarters, but Ulanti's experienced hive-born eyes could pick out the details of the place. What he saw was a room decorated in a strict spartan style, far less luxurious than Ulanti's own quarters. Even the bed was little more than a simple pallet of the kind given to the lowliest Schola Progenium cadet. Tellingly, there was none of the small but important details to suggest that the captain enjoyed any female company in his quarters. No ornamentation or frivolous pieces of decor. Nothing to relieve the starkness of grey bulkhead walls and bare metal decking. It was permitted for officers of Battlefleet Gothic to keep concubines aboard ship; indeed, it was rumoured that Lord Admiral Ravensburg kept a harem of fifty or more in his staterooms aboard the fleet flagship, Divine Right. Ulanti himself had kept a particularly energetic example of fiery Stranivar womanhood with him in his quarters, until tiring of her recently and deliberately losing her in a game of dice with one of Remus Nyder's junior ordnance officers. Ulanti couldn't imagine Semper allowing himself to be distracted by some base pleasures, and the look of Semper's private quarters only confirmed the flag-lieutenant's opinion of his commanding officer.

A career officer, he lives and breathes only for the Imperial Navy, Ulanti thought. Every minute wasted relaxing in his quarters is a minute not spent overseeing the running of his ship.

Ulanti's gaze fell on the large and ornate desk before him, the only object of any real note in the entire room, its surface cluttered with, star maps and report files. Ulanti recognising the captain's characteristic High Gothic scribbled handwriting. With an effort, he looked away from the pile of sealed holoscript scrolls marked with the sigil indicating they were for the captain's eyes only, until he noticed an object very much out of place amongst all the other detritus of the captain's burden of leadership. It was a skull, larger than any human's, its heavy jutting jawbone crowned with two savage-looking upturned tusks. The eye sockets

were small, sunk deep beneath the thick bony plate of the sloping forehead, and Ulanti saw that the top of the skull's inches-thick dome had been smashed open long ago by what must have been a blow of some considerable force.

Semper followed his second-in-command's gaze, reaching out to touch the grisly object with what seemed to Ulanti a certain amount of fond regard.

'A souvenir of the first boarding action I ever led,' said by way of explanation, picking up the skull and weighing it in his hands. 'A disabled ork raider, part of a pack operating out of the fringes of the Cyclops Cluster. I was terrified, but more afraid of failing in my duty than in dying gloriously in battle. At the height of the battle, I found myself face to face with this brute, one of the creatures' leader breeds. He gave me this—'

With his other hand, Semper touched the long jagged scar that cut down one side of his gaunt face and smiled grimly to himself. 'As you can see, I gave him something even more memorable in return. We took the ship and I was awarded my first combat honours. It was only the Medallion Crimson, but to me then it felt as if I had won the Obscuras Honorifica itself.'

Semper laid down the trophy and looked sharply at his second-in-command. 'You see, Mr Ulanti, I do still remember something of what it is to be an ambitious and hot-blooded young officer. But understand this: while this sector is still at war, there will be no more death duels amongst my officers. Both the Emperor and I would prefer if you killed the enemy instead of each other.'

'I was defending my honour as an officer in His Divine Majesty's Navy,' Ulanti answered stiffly. 'As second-in-command of this vessel, my authority derives directly from your own, captain. If any member of the crew does not respect that authority, then they are challenging not only my position but yours also. I did what I had to in accordance with Lord Admiral Ravensburg's own edicts on duelling to defend my honour and maintain respect for this vessel's chain of command.'

Semper sat back in his chair, pausing before answering the flag-lieutenant. Like Ulanti, the commander of Battlefleet

Gothic was a highborn aristocrat, but while Lord Admiral Ravensburg came from the finest blueblood stock of Cypra Mundi's naval cadre elite, Ulanti came from one of the noble clans of one of the most notorious hive worlds in the Imperium. According to the ancient and hidebound traditions of the Imperial Navy, all hive worlders were scum, trash, a source of mass conscript labour suitable only for use as Imperial Guard cannon fodder or to fill the most lowly and menial positions amongst the vast expendable scrum of press-ganged ratings and indentured workers that made up the bulk of any navy vessel's crew. Officers originating from any one of the hundreds of hive worlds within the Imperium were rare within the ranks of Battlefleet Gothic, and almost unheard of at anything approaching the senior rank now held by Hito Ulanti. His second-in-command's battle was not with his individual brother officers, Semper knew, but with the millennia-old traditions and prejudices of the Imperial Navy itself.

Semper leaned forward to regard his second-in-command, deliberately hardening his voice as he spoke. 'I do not know how things are done on Necromunda, but here in the Segmentum Obscurus, here in the ranks of Battlefleet Gothic, respect from one's brother officers is something to be earned, not won as a duelling arena blood-prize. It is earned by loyalty. Loyalty to the Emperor, to the fleet, to one's own comrades. It is earned in action against the enemies of the Emperor. It is earned by leadership and sacrifice; by the often hard decisions we must make in the course of our duty to the Imperium of Mankind. Ravensburg's edicts be damned! He may be lord admiral of Battlefleet Gothic, but I am captain of this ship, and I say there will be no more duels fought aboard the Macharius. I have consulted with Commissar Kyogen on this matter, and he concurs with my judgement. Brawling and fighting is a punishable offence amongst the lower ranks and now so shall it be amongst officers too, no matter what form it may take.'

Semper leaned back again, seeing something cold and hard come into his flag-lieutenant's eyes. I've insulted him, Semper realised. On his world, any

comparison between the conduct of a noble and that of the teeming billions living below him in the hive must be an insult of the gravest sort. Well, so be it. I've read him the page from the Book of Judgement, so maybe now I should offer him something from the Litanies of Contrition and Compassion.

'If it is blood and glory you seek, lieutenant, if it is a chance to prove yourself to your brother officers, then it is fortunate indeed that you are standing before me now. A short time before I sent for you, Chief Astropath Rapavna arrived bearing an urgent astropath-sent message from Battlefleet Command at Port Maw. The message was sent for my ears only, but I would prefer you to hear it too. Adeptus Rapavna?'

Semper suppressed a smile as Ulantı visibly stiffened with shock at the sound of soft footsteps behind him and the green-cloaked figure of the astropath shuffled forward out of the darkness behind him. Ulantı had not known that the astropath had been in the room with them all along, Semper realised. Technically, it might be thought of as poor protocol to have another present at what had essentially been a private reprimand of a senior officer, but Semper did not consider that such niceties applied in the case of Adeptus Rapavna. Astropaths were a vital part of the Imperium, found by the side of every fleet commander, every Space Marine Chapter Master, every planetary overlord. They stood in the shadows at gatherings of the mighty Council of the High Lords of Terra, waiting silently as their masters debated on issues which would affect the fates of untold billions. There were few secrets in the Imperium that had not first passed through the mind of an astropath; Semper judged that the dressing-down of one impetuous young flag officer would be of little interest to one of these eternally silent keepers of the Imperium's deepest secrets.

The astropath took his place before the captain's desk, nodding briefly in acknowledgement of Ulantı. The lieutenant shifted slightly, clearly uncomfortable to be in such close proximity to the psyker. The very existence of the Imperium depended on psykers such as astropaths and the mutant

Navigators, but on a million inhabited worlds within its far-spread borders, the citizens of the Imperium were taught from birth to hate and fear the mutant and the psyker. The higher one rose in Imperial service, Semper noted, the more one was forced to consort with the likes of astropaths and other such officially-sanctioned abominations.

Rapavna's already mask-like features settled into a fixed waxen image as he entered a trance state, his enhanced mental senses reaching down into his subconscious to find the psychically-transmitted message hidden there. The dark skin of his face was covered in a intricate webwork of tattoos; psychic wards favoured by many of his kind to protect themselves from warp daemons. His eyes were sewn shut – his sight long ago destroyed as a side-effect of the agonising ritual of soul-bonding with the Emperor – but two painted eyes were tattooed onto his closed eyelids, these false eyes staring blindly ahead as the astropath opened his mouth and delivered the message. The voice which emerged was not solely Rapavna's and in its eerie whispering tones Semper knew he could also hear, not only the voice of the others astropaths in the chain that had psychically relayed the message from Port Maw to the Macharius, but also the distant echo of the voice of the senior command officer who had originally given the message to the very first astropath in the chain.

'Imperial Standard 0274143.M41. Ship of the line Bellerophon, Dauntless Class light cruiser assigned Battlegroup Fularis, Bhein Morr Sub-Sector, has attacked and destroyed Adeptus Mechanicus way station, Oreicha system. Assumed Bellerophon crew forsaken the Emperor's light and gone over to side of enemy. Believed important technical information stolen from Oreicha way station. His Divine Majesty's Ship Lord Solar Macharius to intercept and destroy Bellerophon. Mission priority highest. Ave Imperator.'

Rapavna paused, a look of slight confusion on his face. Then his features shifted subtly again as he came out of the fugue state, before he bowed to Semper and glided away from the two officers.

Semper glanced at Ulant, the two of them sharing the same look of sharp anticipation. The Macharius had been assigned to escort duty on the Bhein Morr Run for the last few months since the onset of the Gothic Sector War. It was a vital task, they knew, keeping the supply routes open to the front line systems and protecting the desperately-needed convoys from the pirate raiders of the wolf pack fleets, but both officers yearned for a chance to engage directly with their main enemy.

'It would seem that our victory over the Vengis has not been forgotten after all,' said Semper, unrolling a large chart across the expanse of his desk. 'We have finally been given a mission worthy of our devotion to the Emperor. The recovery of the stolen technical data is a vital task, certainly – but to allow a mutinied crew to escape unpunished or one of His Divine Majesty's ships to join the ranks of the enemy would be to bring dishonour on the entire battlefleet. Make no mistake about it, the successful completion of this mission is matter of honour for all of Battlefleet Gothic.

'Of course,' he added, indicating the spread-out starchart, 'to bring vengeance to the enemies of the Emperor, we must first find them. Your opinion, Mr Ulant?'

The captain indicated the map and Ulant leaned forward, inspecting the complex network of star system positions, interlinking warp passages, tide patterns and time-dilation estimate equations that made up any normal Imperium starchart. The ability to read such charts, to absorb and understand the multi-layered levels of information contained within them, was just one of the many skills required of a senior officer in His Divine Majesty's Imperial Navy.

Ulant ran his fingers across the surface of the chart, tracing out the Bellerophon's most likeliest course headings. 'They're probably without any Navigator capability,' he suggested, looking up to see Semper nodding in agreement. The Navis Nobilite was one of the oldest and most crucial cornerstones of the Imperium, and a ship's Navigator traditionally chose death rather than giving himself up to the Emperor's enemies.

'That means they can only make short blind warp jumps of no more than a few light years at a time,' continued Ulant, one finger marking out a cluster of star systems in the upper corner of the chart. 'Their last reported position was in the Oreicha system, but the nearest enemy-occupied territory to there is here in the Killian-Ator group. That's where they're probably making for. But to get there they have to make six or seven separate warp jumps, avoiding Imperium-controlled systems and standard fleet patrol routes on the way.'

Ulant looked up at his captain, who silently nodded for him to continue. 'Given our current position and the renegades' most likely course towards the enemy lines, I believe we will still be able to intercept them-' Ulant's finger moved across the rough surface of the chart. The finest and oldest starchart parchments were supposed to be made from human skin, but this felt like some lesser substitute; animal hide, perhaps.

'Here.' His finger stabbed down on a remote single star well off the normal warp travel routes. The accompanying chart icons identified it as a dying red dwarf star orbited by four barren and uninhabited planetoids. 'Delphi. We can intercept them in the Delphi system.'

Semper leaned back in his chair, smiling. 'I concur, and so did Navigator Cassander when I consulted him earlier. To your station, Mr Ulant. We make the ascent into the Immaterium in forty minutes.'



HALF SPEED, Mr Kelto. Keep our power emissions down and maintain full outward surveyor scanning,' Pava Magell ordered.

The Bellepheron was moving forward cautiously into the star system, its long-range surveyors probing for the tell-tale energy signatures of any other ships in the area. Delphi was a barren wilderness system, just one of the hundreds of such groups within the vast area of space encompassed within the Gothic Sector, but the new captain of the Bellerophon was not

in the habit of taking unnecessary risks. Those few short but intensely bloody hours of mutiny which had swept through the ship had taken long and careful planning by him and the small circle of other like-minded officers aboard the *Bellerophon*. The Imperium was losing the Gothic Sector War, Magell had realised, and it had been surprisingly easy to find other young officers who had come to the same conclusion and who were equally frustrated with the stultified thinking and hidebound traditions of the Imperial Navy. Anyone with true insight could see that the power of Warmaster Abaddon and his followers was in the ascendancy. The living corpse imprisoned on the Golden Throne would be powerless to stop the forces now sweeping out of the Eye of Terror. First the Gothic Sector, soon the whole rotting body politic of the Imperium itself, Magell thought with a smile – and the Imperium's new masters would remember and reward those who had been first to realise in which direction the tides of fate were moving throughout the galaxy.

Magell remembered his own moment of such realisation, recalling the dank stench of the *Bellepheron*'s ship's brig and the whispering voice of the captured enemy prisoner who, out of what had then seemed a feeling of morbid curiosity, Magell had gone down to the brig to interrogate. He had made a point of personally executing the prisoner afterwards, mostly to allay the suspicions of the ever-watchful Commissar Brandt, but by then the seeds of insurrection had already been planted in the ambitious young flag-lieutenant's mind. The prisoner – one of the sorcerer-navigators of Abaddon's fleets – had cunningly seen the doubts already there and had revealed to him something of the ways and secret recognition signs used amongst the covert groups of followers of the Powers of the Warp, and it was on a regular stopover on an Imperium mining world that Magell had first made contact with a coven of Chaos worshippers. Again Magell smiled to himself, remembering how shockingly easy it had been to find the servants of the Ruinous Powers, and wondering what Lord Admiral Ravensburg would say if he knew just how many Chaos covens

flourished on every inhabited world in the Gothic Sector and even in the furthest reaches of the holds and crew decks of many Imperial Navy vessels.

After that, Magell and his fellow conspirators had set about secretly encouraging and nurturing discontent amongst the crew; not a difficult feat to achieve, considering master of the *Bellerophon* Captain Aagen Blothe's harsh and zealous attitude to all matters relating to discipline aboard his vessel. Magell had bided his time, waiting for word from his new-found masters within the Eye of Terror. At last it had arrived, telling him what they required him to do before he would be welcomed into the ranks of the reaver fleets of Warmaster Abaddon.

Magell settled back into his captain's chair, his hand touching the control lectern in front of him and covering the patina of dried blood – belonging to the chair's former occupant, presumably – which still stained the rune icons there. That old fool Blothe had still been alive when Magell handed him over to the crew, and Magell idly wondered if they had been able to make good on their promise to keep their former commanding officer alive but begging for death for days to come. Magell ran his hand across the pattern of glowing rune icons, thinking of the stolen tech-priest secrets now safely stored within the memory banks of the ship's logic engines. He had done as his masters had bidden, and when the *Bellerophon* reached the safety of Chaos-controlled space he would present the information in person to Warmaster Abaddon. Of course, the majority of his crew knew nothing of the true nature of their new allies, but Magell cared little about their fate after–

'Rearward surveyors detecting an unknown vessel approaching on an intercept course: distance 840,000 kilometres.' The blank emotionless voice of the servitor drone rang out in the quiet of the undermanned command deck, instantly snapping the *Bellerophon*'s new captain out of his reverie.

'Officer of the Watch, confirm and identify!' barked Magell, not trusting the word of one of the machine-men slaves. Lieutenant Kelso bent over the lectern screen in front of him, the light from the

rows of rune-signs scrolling across the screen casting a sickly glow over his nervous young features.

'Energy output shows it's a capital vessel. It's jamming its own vessel recognition codes, but from the reactor signature, I'd say it was an Imperial ship, almost certainly cruiser level or better.'

Despite the obvious danger, Magell allowed himself to relax somewhat. As a light scouting cruiser, the Bellerophon would be heavily outgunned by any of the standard Imperial cruiser types, but even with the internal damage and heavy crew casualties caused during the mutiny Magell was confident that his faster and more manoeuvrable vessel could still outrun its larger lumbering cousin. In fact, the only way that the other Imperial ship could successfully cut off their escape would be if—

'Change in its energy signature!' Kelso said, panic clear in his voice. 'Multiple smaller energy signatures breaking away from it. It's an attack craft carrier! It's sending bomber squadrons after us!'



SQUADRON COMMANDER Milos Caparan surveyed the instrumentation panel in front of him, intoning a silent prayer of thanks as the status runes representing each of the ten Starhawk bombers under his command glowed a healthy green. Glancing out the cockpit window, he could see his wingmen taking up position to his port and starboard, each of them tens of kilometres distant but with the bright flares of their multiple mass-reactive engines starkly marking their position against the blackness of space. To his rear the seven other Starhawks of his squadron would also be manoeuvring into attack formation, he knew, and somewhere beyond them the Starhawks of Firedrake, Harbinger and Mantis squadrons would be doing the same, joining up with his own squadron and forming up one large attack wing as they closed the distance on their target. Forty Starhawks.

Ave Imperator, he thought to himself as he keyed open a comm-link channel. Let the enemies of the Emperor beware.

'Nemesis One to Macharius. All systems are green. Distance to target: 200,000 kilometres, and closing.'

+Understood, Nemesis.+ came back the reply, Caparan recognising the craggy-toned voice of Remus Nyder, the Macharius's formidable Master of Ordnance. +Macharius bids you good hunting.+



TAKING HIS accustomed place in the central nave of the command deck, Leoten Semper watched with his usual hawk-like intensity as the pattern of glowing icon markers on the main scanner screen displayed the Starhawk attack wave's progress towards their target.

'Squadrons within attack range of target,' reported Remus Nyder, his Ordnance Control area of the bridge now buzzing with activity as teams of junior officers and grey-cloaked tech-priests monitored the streams of data being fed back from the Starhawks. 'They're reporting incoming defensive fire from the target.'

Semper looked over to where his flag-lieutenant stood. 'Mr Ulanti?'

The Necromundan activated a rune on his lectern console, glancing over the information now displayed there. 'They may be firing at us, sir, but they've not as yet hit anything. We're His Divine Majesty's Imperial Navy, not the groundpounder rabble of the Imperial Guard, and we don't panic at the first sign of danger. Recommend that attack wave proceeds on to close strike distance from target, and deploy missiles from there for optimum effect.'

Semper nodded in agreement at his Flag-Lieutenant's forthright response, and gestured to the waiting master of ordnance.

'Signal all squadrons to proceed as ordered. Mr Ulanti will give the launch order at his discretion.'

'VANDIRE'S TEETH!' Milos Caparan cursed, triggering his starboard thrusters and jinking the two hundred ton attack bomber out of the path of kilometre-wide explosive starburst which filled the view out of the cockpit's main viewing port. All around the lead Starhawk, the hard vacuum of space was filled with similar explosions and energy bursts. At this range – still almost one thousand kilometres away from the target – a direct hit was almost impossible, but each energy blast emitted a burst of widespread and high-intensity radiation lethal to both a bomber's crew and control systems, while each exploding anti-ordnance missile warhead or mass-reactive shell threw out a hail of shrapnel that could cover a volume of space tens of kilometres across.

Caparan activated one of the runes on his comm-link console, sending out an automated status request to the rest of his squadron. Elsewhere, he knew, the other squadron commanders in the attack wave would be doing likewise. The cockpit's open-channel comm-link squawked to life as the responses came flooding back.

+Nemesis Three to Nemesis Leader. Surveyor systems taken offline by that last radiation burst. Missile targeting systems also gone. Tech-Adept Eliphas is attempting to effect repairs now. +

+Nemesis Five reporting. Heavy energy bleed from our power plant. Shrapnel hit must have severed a feed line somewhere. Unable to effect repair. We'll make it to the target, Nemesis One, but it'll be a slow and scary ride back to the Macharius. +

+Nemesis Nine... heavy damage... starboard engine gone... reserve air supply... -ty percent crew casualties... luck, Nemesis One... kkkkkkkkkkkk +

Caparan stabbed a rune on his console, switching comm-link channels. 'Nemesis to Macharius,' he snarled, unable to keep the anger out of his voice. 'I'm losing bombers here. Request permission to launch missiles!'

+Macharius to Nemesis. + came back the irritatingly calm-voiced reply. +Proceed to target. Launch order will be given when and as Macharius deems necessary. +

Caparan shared a look with his co-pilot, both men recognising the voice on the comm-link.

'It's Ulanti,' nodded his co-pilot, Madik Torr, a solid and dependable veteran with more than sixty combat missions to his credit. 'That hive-trash killed Luccian, and now it seems he's determined to wipe out the rest of us as well.'

Both men grimly turned their attention to the task before them, trying to second-guess the gunners aboard the Bellerophon as they piloted the powerful gull-winged deep space bomber through the crop of starburst explosions that blossomed in the void between them and their target.

Eight hundred kilometres. A flare of blinding energy off their port wing. Caparan checked his console readout, seeing the icon representing Nemesis Two stutter and fade out.

Seven hundred kilometres. A piercing scream rang out over the open comm-channel, a terrified and nameless voice gibbering out a hurried prayer commending his soul to the Emperor before being finally cut off in a scream of static followed by the telling static hiss of dead air.

Six hundred kilometres. Caparan's craft was rocked by the concussive blast of an explosion somewhere off its starboard wing. He fought to bring the bomber under control, his mind only barely registering the flashing red icons lighting up all over his instrumentation panels and the ugly klaxon alarm sounding over the craft's internal comm-net.

'Hull breach,' warned the eerily calm voice of Tech-Adept Shanyin Ko, sounding barely more human than the four onboard servitor drones under his control. 'Recommend you switch to flight suit emergency oxygen supplies until breach has been sealed.'

Five hundred kilometres. In space combat terms, this was considered near suicidal, a point-blank range. Down in the nose cone section housing the navigator and bombardier, the whine of the payload's locked-on targeting systems rose to an insistent scream audible over the bomber's comm-net.

+Macharius to attack wing. You are granted permission to launch.+

Thirty-five remaining Starhawks launched half their full payload at once from a distance of just over four hundred and eighty kilometres. Three of them suffered missile launch failure due to damage sustained in flight, one of them transforming into an cloud of vaporised gas when its activated missiles detonated whilst still fixed in their wing mounts.

The guns aboard the Bellerophon suddenly fell silent, the ship's surveyor systems requiring a scanning field free of the radioactive static of explosions and energy bursts as the information they gathered was fed back to the ship's logic engines. All over the ship, non-vital technical systems slowed to a crawl or temporarily blacked out entirely while the logic engines devoted the greater part of their processing capacity to calculating speeds, trajectories and interception points as the oncoming wave of missiles rushed towards their target at a speed of tens of kilometres a second. As the energy levels fluctuated all through the ship, the crew could only cower in the semi-darkness and pray to whatever powers they now followed as they blindly consigned their fate to ancient and barely-understood technology from an era millennia before their own birth. With the missile cluster now only a hundred kilometres and scant seconds away, the Bellerophon activated its final anti-ordnance defences, the logic engines feeding targeting coordinates and firing solutions through to these last-ditch automated defences. A gridwork of multilaser turrets, autocannon batteries, plasma throwers and flechette launchers studded the outer hull of the Bellerophon and these activated now, throwing out a short-lived but concentrated curtain of firepower between the vessel and the missile wave.

Each Starhawk had launched half its full payload of ten plasma warhead missiles apiece. Of these, over thirty per cent had, even at such close range, malfunctioned or failed to acquire their target. Another twenty per cent would be destroyed by the Bellerophon's anti-ordnance systems. Of the one hundred and sixty launched in the bomber wave, less than eighty would reach

their target – and only a fraction of even these would penetrate the ancient vessel's metres-thick armoured hull and do any damage that really mattered.

It would still be more than enough to achieve the desired effect.



‘STARHAWK ATTACK wing reports target well struck,’ announced Master of Ordnance Nyder with more than a hint of pride in his voice. ‘Surveyor scans confirm the same – its reactor output is fluctuating wildly and its void shield power levels are as naught. Target is crippled and drifting powerless in space. Starhawk wing requests permission to make a return sweep and expend all remaining payload.’

Nyder looked expectantly at his captain. By long-standing fleet tradition, the honour of the final kill should go to his Starhawk crews, but such a decision was the captain's privilege alone. It would not be unusual for a captain to choose to finish off a crippled enemy ship with torpedoes or massed weapon fire from the ship's main batteries, a diplomatic decision which would allow a navy vessel's bitterly competitive flight and gunnery crews to share equal honours in the victory. If Nyder was at all taken back by what his captain said next, it never showed on the veteran officer's impassive face.

‘Mr Ulanti, you have tactical command in this engagement. What is your decision?’

If Hito Ulanti was at all surprised by the captain's choice, he showed no sign of it in his immediate and unhesitant response. ‘Signal Starhawk squadrons to return to the Macharius. Captain, at present Battlefleet Gothic is still seriously under-strength, and the loss of one ship to the side of the enemy hardly helps the matter. But why compound the damage, when instead we can do something to redress the balance in our favour again?’

‘Explain yourself, Mr Ulanti!’ Semper barked, ‘What exactly are you suggesting?’

Ulanti looked up at his captain, a distinct gleam of excitement evident in his eyes. 'A boarding assault, captain, which I volunteer to personally lead in the first assault wave. We board the Bellerophon, reclaim it for the service of the Emperor and retrieve the stolen technical information!'



BOARDING ACTION! Look lively, you scum! Find yourselves weapons and form up into boarding parties! Bull-necked petty officers stormed up the narrow aisles of the crew decks, savagely kicking or clubbing anyone not moving fast enough for their liking. Maxim Borusa roused himself from his meagre pallet, scratching at the fresh bitemarks from the parasites that infested his bedding, and spat out a well-aimed stream of brown-stained mixture of saliva and tajii juice that narrowly missed the polished boots of his latest nemesis, Petty Officer Dobryzn.

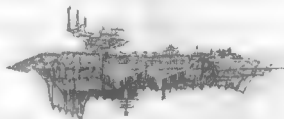
'On your feet, Borusa.' Dobryzn grinned down at him. 'Time to do your duty for the Emperor and put that magical invulnerability of yours to the test!'

Maxim sat up, force of habit causing him to rub at the scars on his wrists. It had been months since he had worn manacles, months since his status as the sole survivor of a direct hit that had wiped out the two hundred other convict slave ratings in the gunbay where he had been assigned had turned him into almost a talismanic good luck figure amongst his fellow crewmen, but Maxim swore he could still feel those metal cuffs cutting into his flesh.

He spat again, clearing the vile aftertaste of the intoxicating tajii root juice out of his mouth. Let those prayer-babbling idiots think what they want, Maxim decided. He knew that the only luck that counted for anything was the kind you made yourself.

He stood up, reaching under his pallet to bring out his own good luck talisman, a metre and a half of solid metal engineer's wrench. Petty officers and crewbosses were issuing weapons – axes, gaffs, cutlasses, even chainswords – to everyone assigned

to the boarding assault, but for his own personal reasons Maxim preferred to use this. He smiled to himself as he took hold of the heavy tool, remembering the satisfying crunch of bone as it stove in the skull of the last man who had underestimated Maxim Borusa.



THE FIRST RULE of space combat is to always know the exact position of the enemy but Pava Magell didn't have to check any of the surveyor screens around him to check where abouts the Macharius was in relation to his own stricken vessel. Looking out of the command deck viewing port, he could see the shape of the Imperial cruiser – vast and imposing at such close range – blotting out the starfield as it slid into position port side of the crippled Bellerophon. The batteries on that flank of the Bellerophon were gone, obliterated by the hail of missiles that had punctured through the warship's armoured skin, but Magell could see the Macharius' own gun batteries trained on his ship – just as he could see the tiered openings of the attack carrier's launch bays, ready to unleash another wave of bombers at their helpless target. Magell knew that the Macharius could destroy the Bellerophon at will, but he also knew that by moving in this close, the captain of the Macharius had already signalled his real intent.

'They're launching a boarding assault!' Kelso said, his voice ragged with panic and fear. 'We don't stand a chance. We should signal our surrender now. The punishment for mutiny is death, I know, but with the rate of casualties the fleet is suffering, Ravensburg can't afford to throw away an entire crew. Perhaps we could—'

Magell reholstered his laspistol and stepped contemptuously over the body of his former Officer of the Watch. With so many other corpses littering the decks of the Bellerophon, one more shouldn't make any more difference. He drew his sabre and strode towards the doors of the command deck, signalling for the other

remaining officers to join him. He didn't have to turn round to look out the viewing bay to know about the swarm of shuttles and assault pods now exiting the Macharius as they swiftly bridged the void between the two ships. Soon they would be attaching themselves to the outer hull of the Bellerophon, breaching airlocks and entry ports and unleashing their battle-hardened occupants into the interior of the ship.

Magell knew that his short-lived command of the Bellerophon was over. He had gambled, and he had lost everything. Now all he had left was his honour.



FOR THE SECOND time within a few scant days, the decks and sections of the Bellerophon rang with the sounds of combat as its crew battled with the boarding parties from the Macharius for control of the stricken ship.

Hito Ulanti sidestepped the chainsword blade which buzzed through the air in front of him. A dangerous weapon, he knew, but a clumsy one as well, with many of those who wielded it depending too much on the weapon's fearsome destructive capabilities rather than their own fighting prowess. Ulanti knocked the blade aside on its return swing with a casual flick of his weapon and then thrust the point of his sabre into his opponent's throat. The enemy – some kind of ship's engineer, judging by the armoured suit he wore – collapsed to the ground, gurgling. Ulanti moved swiftly on, grinding one booted heel into the face of his still-twitching opponent for good measure.

In front of him, he saw another wave of the Bellerophon's defenders charging down the corridor towards him. He drew his laspistol, sending volley after volley of searing laser fire into their packed ranks, only stopping when the weapon's powerpack critically overheated, scorching the flesh of his hand. Ulanti threw the pistol away with a curse, taking up his sabre again and urging forward the remains of his boarding party who filled

the corridor behind him. A stray shotgun blast took off the head of the man next to him, adding another corpse to the carpet of bodies that lined the passageway. A hand scrabbled at his legs from down amongst this litter of dead and wounded and Ulanti stabbed his sabre down in a short killing thrust, not even glancing down to check whether his victim had been from the crew of the Macharius or the Bellerophon. Blood flowed down the young officer's face from a head wound he didn't remember receiving and the creeping numbness in his hand told him that the burn wounds there would require treatment after the battle.

Ulanti had heard of the tactics perfected by the warriors of the Adeptus Arbites for such boarding actions: small well-armed squads of Space Marines penetrating deep into the interior of enemy craft via teleport assault or manned boarding torpedoes and waging a rigorously-coordinated battle plan with each squad seizing control of a specific vital part of the ship.

This was nothing like that; this was simple brute slaughter, a bloody scrum in which the only victors would be the side which succeeded in putting all of the enemy to the sword. There were other senior command officers from the Macharius aboard the Bellerophon – Ulanti knew that Commissar Kyogen had taken command of the second assault wave from the Macharius – but he had no idea where they were or how they were faring in their own separate battles.

The blast doors at the end of the corridor rumbled open, disgorging another wave of the Bellerophon's crew. Defenders and boarding party attackers met in a savage clash of arms. Ulanti rushed forward, catching a glimpse of a familiar crimson braiding on a uniform worn by the figure at the head of the enemy counter-attack. It was the uniform of a flag-lieutenant, identical to Ulanti's own, and so far it was the most senior rank Ulanti had seen amongst the defending crew. Ulanti lashed out with his sabre with a newfound vigour, cutting a path through the press of bodies towards his enemy counterpart from the Bellerophon.

MAXIM BORUSA spat into his opponent's face, the rebel screaming as the stinging tajii juice came into contact with his eyes. He followed up with a brutal head butt, breaking the bones of the rebel's face. The crewman reeled back, giving the Stranivar underhiver space in which to use to use his wrench. One blow and the rebel's head opened up in a red gush.

'Macharius! To me, Macharius crew!'

Maxim looked round to see Petty Officer Dobrzyn struggling against a trio of attackers. Maxim didn't hesitate, shoulder-charging into the back of the nearest one and smashing him against a thick iron bulkhead. He stumbled, his feet becoming entangled amongst the limbs of the downed man and he was a split-second late in blocking the attack from the next enemy in line. He hissed in pain as the rebel's sword blade sliced into the muscles of his upper arm, retaliating with a short punch into the rebel crewman's neck.

The man staggered back, trying vainly to staunch the blood fountaining from the hole that Maxim had opened in his jugular with the narrow-bladed stiletto secreted in his fist. The third rebel came at him with a hooked boarding gaff. Maxim took it off him with dismissive ease, snapped the man's arm and gave him his weapon back by carving it through his stomach.

Maxim bent over the prone form of Dobrzyn, checking him for signs of life and finding a weak pulse. Good, he thought, hoisting up the petty officer and carrying him towards the nearest knot of Macharius crewmen.

'Help me!' he yelled at the top of his voice. 'Help Petty Officer Dobrzyn!'

Hands reached out to take the weight of the injured petty officer. In the confusion Maxim deftly withdrew the stiletto blade from between Dobrzyn's ribs and slipped away before anyone noticed that the injured man was already dead.

Looking down, he noticed that Dobrzyn's dark blue rank sash had come away in his hand. Distractedly he tied it round his arm wound as a makeshift field dressing, then headed back into the thick of battle.

FEINT. BLOCK. CUT. Parry. Riposte. His opponent's fencing style had elements to it that were dangerously unfamiliar to Magell, but in its basics it differed little from the thousands of other styles of swordsmanship as practiced on countless violent warrior culture worlds throughout the Imperium. He and his opposite number from the Macharius were well-matched. The enemy flag-lieutenant was probably the better swordsman, Magell realised, but he still had an advantage over the Imperial officer. He had nothing left to lose, and a man who has already accepted the fact of his own imminent death was a dangerous opponent indeed.

All around them, men were fighting and dying, and it was impossible to tell which way the battle was going, but Magell knew that victory would eventually go to the Macharius. The Bellerophon's standard crew complement was several thousand less than the larger Dictator class vessel, and Magell knew that over a third of the rebel cruiser's crew had died in the mutiny, and probably a thousand or so more in the bomber attack. They were doomed, but he was determined to acquit himself well before the end.

One of his own crew rushed forward, wild-eyed with bloodlust as he bore down on the Imperial officer. Magell ran him through without a moment's thought, not willing to be robbed of the honour of the enemy flag officer's death. But the delicate balance of the duel had been broken. His opponent was the first to take advantage of the moment with a lightning-fast thrust. Magell twisted his body, deliberately not parrying the blow, and he felt hot bright pain as the blade slid deep into his side.

Magell fought down the wave of pain. He knew that, with his blade impaled inside Magell's own body, the enemy officer was effectively disarmed. Magell brought his own sabre down on the shoulder of the Imperial officer's sword arm, the heavy blade cleaving into flesh and bone. The Imperial officer cried out, falling back and leaving himself defenceless against Magell's follow-up killing blow.

Magell swayed on his feet, the sabre still piercing his side, and raised his arm to strike. A grip as implacable as the massive docking clamps used to hold a vessel in

orbital dry dock descended on his wrist, crushing the bones and causing his sword to slip from suddenly nerveless fingers. He felt something sharp and cold punch him in the lower back, the coldness penetrating deep into his body there. Once, twice, three times, in rapid succession. His legs gave way beneath him but Magell remaining standing, dangling like a puppet in the grip of that vice-like pressure on the wrist of his still upraised-arm. Then the pressure went away and Magell collapsed to the deck, his vision dimming.



THROUGH A HAZE of pain and shock, Hito Ulanti looked up to see the stoop-shouldered giant standing over him. The giant leaned down over him, rough hands lifting him up. Ulanti's eyes saw but didn't register the hive world gang ritual scar patterns and prison world tattoos and brands which covered the giant's arms and face.

'Maxim Borusa, sir,' growled a voice in an accent that could only have come from the depths of the Stranivar Underhive. 'Crew of the Mach, sir. You're in safe hands now.'

'I... I owe you my thanks,' Ulanti mumbled, his eyes fixing on the bloodstained rank sash. 'I owe you... my thanks, Petty Officer Borusa.'

Maxim Borusa grinned. He didn't recognise the officer whose life he'd just saved, but he knew what all that fancy braiding and uniform ornamentation meant. Command deck brass, and his ticket away from the miseries of life on the lower decks.

'If you say so, sir. If you say so.'



+BELLEROPHON TO Macharius. Prize crew aboard and in position. We have restored engine and warp jump capability. Ready to move out on your mark. +

The squadron of Chaos scout ships, three Idolator class raiders, drifted inert on the fringes of the Delphi system, listening to the intercepted radio chatter between the Imperial vessel and its captured prize. They had arrived too late to rendezvous with the renegade Imperial ship and escort it safely back to enemy space, and they could only watch from hiding as the Warmaster's prize was snatched away from them. The commander of the raider squadron knew that his ships would have stood no chance against an Imperial cruiser and its accursed bomber squadrons, but he doubted that the Warmaster would see it in such terms. Standing on his vessel's command deck, the dark shrouded captain watched as the target icons of the two Imperial cruisers moved away towards the outer edge of surveyor range. He turned towards the cultist astropath standing nearby.

'Send the signal to the Warmaster. Inform him that the technical information the rebel vessel was bringing to us remains in the hands of our enemies.'

The daemon-thing living inside the flesh of the possessed Chaos cultist hissed in displeasure, its body warping into twisted new shapes as almost a physical foretaste of the Warmaster's own anger at the news he would soon be receiving.

All over the bridge, the command crew busied themselves with their appointed tasks, none of them daring to look their doomed captain in the eye.



'MY THANKS, Magos Castaboras. Please continue with your work.' The haughty tech-priest nodded in acknowledgement, his expression hidden behind the mask he wore, and left to join his entourage of servants waiting outside, leaving Semper alone in his quarters.

Captain Semper leaned forward on his desk, one hand rubbing the jagged ork-blade scar that marked one side of his face. It was force of habit, he knew, one that he was particularly prone to whenever he was troubled. He cleared his mind, thinking through what he had just learned.

The stolen technical information had been removed from the Bellerophon's logic engines and transferred to the jealous guard of the Adeptus Mechanicus tech-priests aboard the Macharius. An astropath message had been sent acknowledging the safe retrieval of the data, together with his recommendation that his injured flag-lieutenant receive an official commendation for his actions in the battle, but Battlefleet Command were anxious to know the exact nature of the stolen information. As the vessel's most senior tech-priest, Castaboras had already completed a partial analysis of the coded data and had presented his findings to Semper. The two men were the only people aboard the starship who knew what the stolen data files contained, but what they had learned posed more questions than it answered.

The files were a technical overview of the mighty Blackstone Fortresses, the six massive and ancient alien constructs which formed the backbone of the Imperial Navy's strength in the Gothic Sector. Each Blackstone was base to its own battlegroup fleet – and each possessed more than enough firepower of its own to fend off an attack by any of the Warmaster's current reaver fleets. The information in the files was highly sensitive, yes, but never in the history of Battlefleet Gothic had a Blackstone Fortress fallen to the enemy and Semper found it hard to believe that the Warmaster would consider wasting his strength in such a foolhardy move.

'Emperor's oath!' he swore to himself as he studied the marked-out positions of the Blackstone systems on the starchart in front of him. What did it all mean?



SOMEWHERE WITHIN the Eye of Terror, where space and warp space merged together as one, Warmaster Abaddon, Despoiler of Worlds and Dread Vessel of the Legacy of Horus, stared out at the eternally shifting patterns of the maelstrom. What he saw there, what mysteries and secrets of the Powers of the Warp revealed to him, only the Warmaster alone knew.

He turned back to the scene before him in the audience chamber, dismissing the mutated messenger thing with a curt gesture. It scuttled away gratefully, all too aware that a subtly different gesture would have caused any of the dozen terrifying figures in Terminator armour standing around the room to cut it down in an instant. The sword in the scabbard at the Warmaster's side made a low keening sound, sensing its master's dark mood. Abaddon laid a hand on its hilt, murmuring a few words of blasphemous reassurance to quiet the daemon-spirit bound into the weapon.

In truth, the Warmaster's anger would soon be assuaged. Orders had been despatched, and the commanders and crews of the escort squadron would soon know the price of their failure. Abaddon knew that the loss of the Blackstone data was only of temporary significance and would not affect his carefully-laid plans.

He turned back to the viewing bay, staring out the wide daemon-mouthed portal in the flank of his temporary flagship and into the maelstrom beyond. He could see shapes moving out there in the warp, innumerable small vessels and construction platforms. Through the moving warp patterns he could see the spires and pinnacles of object of their labours, a vast and threatening shape hanging motionless amidst the tides of warp space. It was almost complete now, he knew. His new flagship. His new terror weapon. His 'planet killer', thought the Warmaster, enjoying the crudeness of the name – so simple, but so apt – that many of his lesser followers had already bestowed upon the device.

His thoughts returned to the six secret prizes that were the only objectives in the entire war that truly mattered. Soon this new weapon, this planet killer, would be unleashed on his enemies. The followers of that withered corpse on the Golden Throne would tremble in terror at the destruction it would cause. Let them be afraid, gloated the Despoiler. Let them think this will be the worst they have to face. When the time is right, when all the pieces are in place, they will soon know there is far worse to come. ✱

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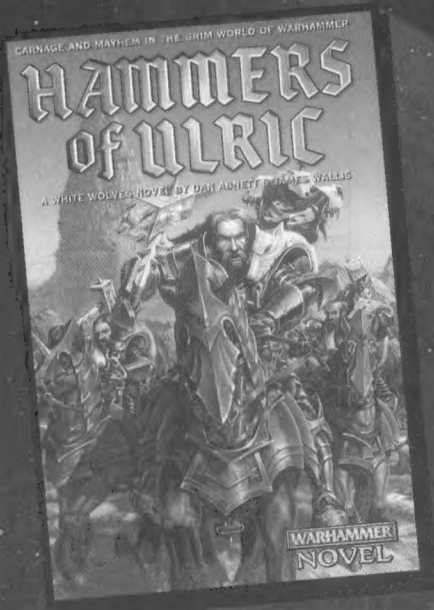
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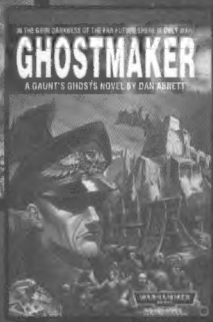
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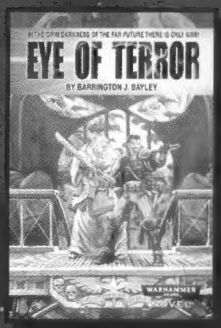
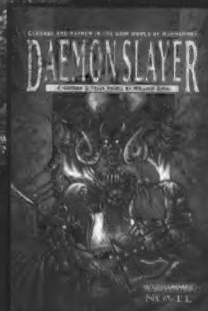
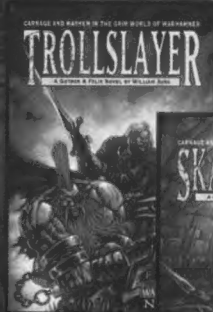
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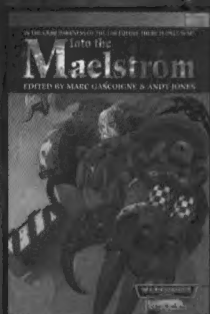
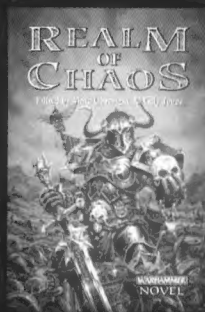
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'I smell the blood of a hero,' a voice said through the vox link.

'Who speaks?' Priad rolled over, daring more volleys of enemy fire.

There was a figure behind them on the green rocksides: an Iron Snake, tall, bare-headed, swathed in a cloak, stalking forward, oblivious to the rain of fire which doused the ground around him. Petrok! *It was great Petrok himself!*

• **BLOOD BROTHERS** by Gordon Rennie & Mike Perkins

'I have defeated you all in single combat. Some of you fought well enough to be spared this far. To those of you still living I offer this choice: you can die here, your blood leaking out into the desert sands, or you can accept the gift I offer you. The choice is yours – death or life eternal!'

• **TYBALT'S QUEST** by Gav Thorpe

Tybolt spun around, sword at the ready. His grey eyes tried to pierce the gloom. Shadows drifted in and out of focus with the rolling fog. Tybolt could hear an inhuman snuffling noise. There was an unearthly squeal and the shadow leapt at him from the darkness.

'Die, spawn of blackness!' Tybolt cried, stepping sideways and bringing his heavy sword flashing down. The blade bit deep into flesh, and blood fountained through the mist, splashing across Tybolt's surcoat and armour.

• **BATTLE OF THE ARCHAEOSAURS** by Barrington J. Bayley

Guardman Leche and Colour Sergeant Hangist were the last two left in the prisoner cage. In his tattered uniform, Osmín Leche stared from between the rough-hewn timbers at the stone-age village which sprawled all round him. One thing was true about the stone age primitives, and that was their cruelty. There had been fifty captives in the cage to begin with. The villagers had been killing one per day, always by some different method. Their ingenuity seemed inexhaustible. Leche shivered. He trembled. The Imperium was far away. The Emperor was but a word.

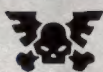
• **MATTERS OF HONOUR** by Gordon Rennie

All over the ship, the clamour of combat was dying away. Flag-Lieutenant Pava Magell walked the length of the main chancel leading to the ship's arsenal, accepting the salutes of the weary but victorious fighters.

'Sir?' Magell turned. Acting Officer of the Watch Kelto was standing to attention before him. 'All decks report victory,' grinned the young officer. 'Abaddon be praised, captain, the ship is ours.'

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